The New Criterion

June 1998

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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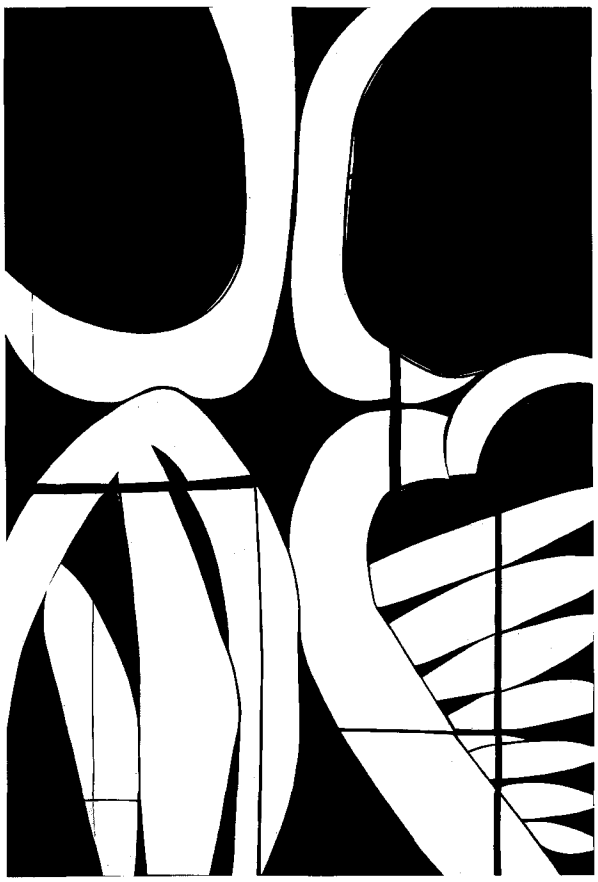

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Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. June 1998, Volume 16, Number 10. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Subscribers: send all remittances, changes of address, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. For subscription problems call (800) 783-4903. Copyright © 1998 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Rt. 250, Milan, OH 44846. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date. Internet: http://www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com

Advertising: Galleries & fine arts: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674.
Publishers & others: Richard A. Vaughan, 129 Phelps Avenue, Rockford, IL 61108. (815) 398-8569.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

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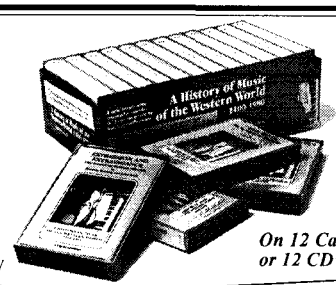

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Notes & Comments: June 1998

Marxism as farce

A specter is haunting the intellectual classes—not exactly the specter of Communism, however, so much as the specter of an irresistible wave of nostalgia for a time when Marxism and its utopian myth of the classless society held so many superior minds in thrall. Now that the tyranny of Communist rule has been lifted from the lives of millions the world over and Marxist doctrine has lost its power to shape the future—for even in China, the last major bastion of Communist Party control, capitalism has succeeded in subverting the faithful—intellectuals in the West are showing signs of a yearning for the good old days when, at no cost to the freedom or prosperity of people like themselves, it was fashionable for Marxism to be upheld as the fount of all wisdom.

It has long been recognized, of course, that in the heyday of its spell over the intellectual life of the West, Marxism had always been something more than an economic or political doctrine. Echoing Marx's condemnation of religion as "the opiate of the masses," the French political philosopher Raymond Aron described Marxism as "the opiate of the intellectuals," and it was certainly true that for many of its adherents in the West the tenets of Marxist thought functioned as a teleological substitute for religious faith, and was thus as resistant to the tests of verification—never mind the tests of common sense—as the most occult doctrines of the religious mystics. For intellectuals, moreover, it was important that Marxism presented itself not as metaphysics or mysticism but as a "science" of history. It was a large part of its allure that it offered its acolytes the absolute assurance that, whatever setbacks Marxism might suffer on the way to building the New Jerusalem, they had elected to be on the right side of history.

We now have ample reason to know that Marxism has itself suffered the fate that its prophets used to reserve for their ideological adversaries—which is to say, it has ended up on that famous ash heap of history. Yet in this post-Marxist era, when Marxist ideology has been stripped of so much of its power to tyrannize entire societies, the will to believe in its virtues and salvage something precious from the ruins persists as a form of conspicuous intellectual consumption among academic minds safely removed from the disobliging consequences of Marxist reality. This remarkable phenomenon is almost enough to persuade us that Marx's celebrated dictum about history—that it repeats itself, occuring first as tragedy and then as farce—is essentially correct, at least as far as the history

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of Marxism is concerned. With the age of Marxism as tragedy drawing to a close, the age of Marxism as farce is now apparently upon us.

Or so we infer from the bizarre spectacle of intellectual hoopla that has welcomed the arrival of a fancy "gift" edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, gotten up to look like the breviary of some Palm Springs religious sect, on the 150th anniversary of its original publication.[1] It would be tempting to regard this publishing event as an episode in political camp—and thus dismissible—were it not for the hosannas that have marked its publication on both sides of the Atlantic.

In New York, for example, Steven Marcus—the George Delacorte Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University—celebrated the occasion with a hortatory essay in *The New York Times Book Review* of April 26 entitled "Marx's Masterpiece at 150." This effusion hailed *The Communist Manifesto* as nothing less than the kind of achievement "we ordinarily associate with great works of the literary imagination—with the imagination of art." Though acknowledging that Marx got certain things a little wrong—"the revolution it hailed was not successful; the proletariat did not become the gravediggers of the bourgeoisie; the ever-deeper pauperization of the working class was not part of the [capitalist] system's 'inevitable tendencies'"—Professor Marcus nonetheless praised the *Manifesto*'s "incandescence" in fusing "prediction, vision, prophesy," etc.

Then, in the London *Times Literary Supplement* of May 8, John Gray—professor of European thought at the London School of Economics—grandly announced that "Marx's view of capitalism has been in some crucial respects vindicated." Professor Gray acknowledged, to be sure, that there was the little problem of what he delicately described as "the historical experience of central economic planning"—in other words, the Marxist "experiment" in the Soviet Union. In his view, however, we have tended to get that problem all wrong. "It is a mistake to think that Soviet planning failed because it was not implemented by a democratic government," writes Professor Gray. "The truth is nearer the opposite. The Soviet system lacked working democratic institutions, because the failure of central planning necessitated tyranny." Huh? Spoken by some schlemiel in a Woody Allen movie, this sort of thing might pass as an amusing bit of *blague*, but in a discussion of "the historical experience of central economic planning" it is simply fatuous. For in what nanosecond of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia were "democratic institutions" ever an integral part of Lenin's vision of the Marxist state?

"Marx's achievement," writes Professor Gray, "was to identify a contradiction in liberal civilization." Yet about which serious writer in nineteenth-century Europe can it not be said that he—or, indeed, she—identified a contradiction in liberal civilization? In one way or another, this was, after all, one of the dominant subjects of European thought in the nineteenth century. Radicals, liberals, conservatives, and reactionaries all weighed in with their grim critiques and dire forecasts, for it was in the very nature of liberal civilization in that period to invite criticism and to debate fundamental principles, which inevitably entails an examination of fundamental contradictions. That is indeed one of the ways in which liberal civilization in the nineteenth century differed from our own version of liberal civilization at the end of the twentieth century. How is it possible for the professor of European thought at the London School of Economics not to be aware of such a thing? But now that the discussion of Marxism has

1 *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, with an introduction by Eric Hobsbawm; Verso, 87 pages, $13.

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entered the age of farce, we can probably expect to see a lot more of the same.

About those much vaunted "contradictions" of late capitalism, moreover, it is certainly time for grownups to acknowledge that living with them has turned out to be far better than any of the possible alternatives. The truth is that capitalism has brought greater improvements in the quality of life for more millions of people than any other system we know. God forbid that any society should ever again be condemned to live under a system that is wholly lacking in such "contradictions."

Weirdo studies 101

We have had occasion to comment on the phenomenon of college "women's studies" programs before. No feature of the contemporary university is more destructive than these "sites" (to use the favored jargon) of politicized "transgression" (ditto). Black studies and other programs of racial and ethnic redress certainly compete with women's studies for utter intellectual nullity. Most are little more than academic ghettos—often extremely well-funded ones—set up to accommodate the results of "affirmative action," i.e., admission to college of the academically unqualified on the basis of some approved badge of victim status. Such programs are self-perpetuating, of course, for what are their graduates equipped to do except become "professors" of the politicized nonsense they have been spoon-fed in college? Thus we have witnessed not only college admission, but hiring, promotion, and tenure according to "affirmative action."

Intellectually fatuous though such programs undoubtedly are, however, they have not commanded anything like the institutional importance of women's studies, which has long since become a major presence in the liberal arts curriculum of most American colleges and universities. And the institutional success of women's studies has led to their ever-increasing radicalization. No sooner does a college administration capitulate and establish a women's studies program than it finds itself confronted with a fresh demand for a "major" in women's studies; that demand granted, there are new demands for more, and more radical, courses, programs, institutes, majors: in gay and lesbian studies, bisexual studies, "transgender studies," etc.

We were reminded of this recently when a news service reported that "Yale University is getting a sex change." The university announced that it planned to rename its women's studies program "women's and gender studies" and reorganize its undergraduate offerings into three areas: women's studies; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies; and gender studies. Henceforth, students graduating with a degree in "women's studies"—whatever that can possibly mean—will get a degree in "women's and gender studies" and their record will note their area of concentration. This will no doubt be useful for future employers: "Ah, yes: all A's in your courses in women's and gender studies but only a B+ in your introductory seminar in transgender bi-sexual relations."

According to the news story, the change was largely terminological since Yale has offered a major in women's studies for more than a decade and has offered courses in all three "areas of concentration." In fact, though, the terminological innovation is not innocent. It signals yet another advance for those eager to transform the college experience into a laboratory for "transgressive" sexual indoctrination.

Margaret Homans, the head of women's studies at Yale, provided an inadvertent hint of this in her comments about the forthcoming changes. "No human experience,"

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she said, "should be beyond the realm of serious scholarship." Whether that is in fact true is worth thinking about: it seems to us that there are plenty of human experiences that are far beyond—or far below—the scope of serious scholarship, especially if one excludes the discipline of abnormal psychology, which is not what Professor Homans had in mind. But the more immediate question is whether most of what goes on under the name of women's studies really qualifies as serious scholarship at all.

One important measure of the seriousness of scholarly inquiry is its disinterestedness. How disinterested are most courses in women's studies? Consider Women's Studies 301a at Yale, for example, "History and Sexual Identity II: Modern Cultures." In this course, according to the course list for the 1997–1998 year, students examine "the development of modern Western cultures for the types of gender and sexual behaviors associated with the modern gay and lesbian identities." Then there is Women's Studies 335a, "Introduction of Lesbian and Gay Studies" (n.b., "of" not "to"), which offers "an introduction to the interdisciplinary examination of human, esp. gay and lesbian, sexual and erotic desires and orientations," etc. Such courses are examples not of serious scholarship but of serious indoctrination.

This is something clearly recognized by Lila Arzua, a twenty-one-year-old student from Miami quoted in the news report describing the changes at Yale. The gender studies curriculum, Miss Arzua said, is "an affront to traditional education" in which "specialized weirdo classes [are] taking the place of foundational classes." Vividly put, we thought, and entirely accurate. Professor Homans said that she hoped that "by having these tracks [transgender studies, etc.] labeled as such in the course catalog, people will sit up and listen." We hope she is right. It would be about time.

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Reflections on a cultural revolution: X

Emotions of virtue

by Roger Kimball

The simplest yet most universal formulation surely remains the widely shared feeling that in the 60s, for a time, everything was possible; that this period, in other words, was a moment of universal liberation, a global unbinding of energies.
—Fredric Jameson, 1984

We ought to develop new needs. One of the new needs we must develop in the course of the revolution is the need for universal self-fulfillment.
—Michael Lerner, 1973

Through reading I was amazed to discover how confused people were.
—Eldridge Cleaver, 1968

Samuel Taylor Coleridge once famously remarked that a "willing suspension of disbelief" was essential to maintaining "poetic faith." Anyone who has looked back dispassionately at the founding documents and personalities of America's cultural revolution knows what Coleridge was talking about. The "faith" in question may have been more spurious than "poetic." But there can be no doubt that America's counterculture—like all utopian movements—has exacted prodigies of credulousness from its myriad adherents, fellow travelers, and promoters.

How could it have been otherwise? Utopian movements succeed because they tell people something they wish desperately to hear. Whether or not the message is true seems beside the point. It is agreeable, or seems at first to be agreeable, and that is enough. "Utopia" literally means "nowhere." If that fact seldom depresses the price of its real estate, it is because—although the mortgage is steep—no one ever actually moves in. For the adepts of the Free Spirit in the fourteenth century, the good news was that they, the elect, were godlike creatures incapable of sin. For Karl Marx, a Communist paradise was waiting for that society brave enough to abolish private property and centralize the means of production. For Norman O. Brown, "the real world, which is not the world of the reality-principle, is the world where thoughts are omnipotent, where no distinction is drawn between wish and deed."

Variations on such themes are as plentiful as they are preposterous. Wilhelm Reich, Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, Timothy Leary, Abbie Hoffman, Tom Hayden, Paul Goodman, Charles Reich, The Beatles: the list of agents for apocalypse is long and varied. It includes artists and intellectuals, entertainers, political activists, blatant poseurs, and professional gurus. In their different ways, these people pandered to a generation's vanity, aspirations, cowardice, and lust for sensation; increasingly, it seemed, they pandered to a generation whose vanity *was* its lust for sensation. They served as a defense against the alarming assaults of ennui.

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Many promulgated—like Rousseau before them—that insatiable greed for the *emotion* of virtue which makes the actual practice of virtue seem superfluous and elevates self-infatuation into a prime spiritual imperative.

The cultural and moral results of these developments were alternately sad and comic; politically and socially, they were destructive if sometimes risible. When Fredric Jameson, the celebrated Marxist professor of literature at Duke University, waxed nostalgic about the 1960s and the "widely shared feeling" that "everything was possible" and "universal liberation" was nigh, he explained the situation in terms that require not simply the willing suspension but the outright obliteration of disbelief. "Mao Zedong's figure for this process," Jameson writes,

> is . . . most revealing: "Our nation," he cried, "is like an atom. . . . When this atom's nucleus is smashed, the thermal energy released will have really tremendous power!" The image evokes the emergence of a genuine mass democracy from the breakup of older feudal and village structures. . . . Yet . . . we now know that Mao Zedong himself drew back from the ultimate consequences of the process he had set in motion, when, at the supreme moment of the Cultural Revolution, . . . he called a halt to the dissolution of the party apparatus and effectively reversed the direction of this collective experiment as a whole. . . . In the West, also, the great explosions of the 60s have led, in the worldwide economic crisis, to powerful restorations of the social order and a renewal of the repressive power of the various state apparatuses.

Let us agree that Mao's image of an atomic explosion was "most revealing." What did it reveal? The prospective "emergence of genuine mass democracy"? Or the obsession with power cultivated by the man who was probably the greatest mass-murderer of the twentieth century? Jameson faults Mao for drawing back from the "ultimate consequences" of the "cultural revolution" he had set in motion in 1966. And what was the nature of that revolution whose "supreme moment" he had betrayed? At Mao's instigation, Leszek Kolakowski explains in *Main Currents of Marxism*, "the universities and schools began to form Red Guard detachments, storm troops of the revolution which were to restore power to the 'masses' and sweep aside the degenerate party and state bureaucracy."

> Mass meetings, processions, and street fighting became a feature of life in all the bigger cities . . . . For several years the schools and universities ceased functioning altogether, as the Maoist groups assured pupils and students that by virtue of their social origin and fidelity to the Leader they were the possessors of a great truth unknown to "bourgeois" scholars. Thus encouraged, bands of young people bullied professors whose only crime was their learning, ransacked homes in search of proofs of bourgeois ideology, and destroyed historical monuments as "relics of the past." Books were burnt wholesale.

Et cetera. And note, finally, how Jameson compares Mao's betrayal of his "collective experiment" with the reassertion of order in the West following the assaults of Sixties radicalism and the Vietnam War. Jameson has been declaring a "worldwide economic crisis" and a "renewal" of repressive state power for as long as anyone can remember. It is safe to assume, however, that neither has intruded much on his prerogatives or remuneration as the Willam A. Lane Professor of comparative literature and director of the graduate program in literature at Duke University.

Of course, Fredric Jameson was quite right to discern a "widely shared feeling" in the Sixties that "everything was possible." The conviction of unlimited possibility—credulousness reborn as policy—is another characteristic of utopian movements. It is what gives them their momentum and allows them to present naïveté as idealism, narcissism as enlightenment. It is also what

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makes utopian movements so susceptible to ideological manipulation. To the extent that one endorses the apotheosis of possibility, one will tend to treat the real world and its occupants with cavalier disregard. Hence the utopian element in all totalitarian political movements. "What binds these men together," Hannah Arendt observed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "is a firm and sincere belief in human omnipotence. Their moral cynicism, their belief that everything is permitted, rests on the solid conviction that everything is possible."

The story of America's cultural revolution is partly the story of the social and moral malaise brought about by a pathology of credulousness. Euphoric hedonism exists on the smiling side of that pathology; on the dour side are clustered many other countercultural phenomena, not least the juvenile political activism and noisy readiness for violence that were such conspicuous features of the age. In America, no group better epitomized this militant radicalism than the infamous Black Panthers, founded in Oakland, California, in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton to achieve black liberation in America by means of revolutionary violence. Seale and Newton certainly deserved the notoriety they elicited from their various clashes with the law, which included charges of murder for both. But it was Eldridge Cleaver—the histrionic author of *Soul on Ice*, one-time presidential candidate for the Peace and Freedom Party, and Minister of Information for the Panthers from 1967 until 1971—who embodied the Panther ideology most vividly.

Eldridge Cleaver was only sixty-two when he died on May 1 of this year. Nearly all the obituaries—and they were plentiful and long—noted that Cleaver's family refused to disclose the cause of death; his periodic addiction to crack cocaine leads one to suspect the worst. (In 1994, the Berkeley police found him staggering about with a severe head wound and crack in his pocket.) By the time he died, Cleaver had been almost totally forgotten. Like many other Sixties radicals (Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin), Cleaver descended into a kind of buffoonery in the later years of his life. An obituary in *The New York Times* sardonically noted that, in the last decades of his life, Cleaver "metamorphosed into variously a born-again Christian, a follower of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, a Mormon, a crack cocaine addict, a designer of men's trousers featuring a codpiece, and even, finally, a Republican."

"Even, finally, a Republican": well, Cleaver clearly came to a bad end, at least from the *Times*'s point of view. In fact, Cleaver's career is a good illustration of the important but easily forgotten truth that buffoonery is no enemy of violence or savagery. Mussolini was a buffoon; so was Idi Amin. Cleaver was not quite in their league, but our Paper of Record honored the former Black Panther with a long obituary because he had once been a nationally recognized hero of the counterculture, a figure who was as feared by the establishment as he was lionized by the radical Left. When Cleaver began teaching an experimental course at the University of California at Berkeley in fall 1968, then-Governor Ronald Reagan was outraged: "If Eldridge Cleaver is allowed to teach our children, they may come home one night and slit our throats." The *Times* quotes Mr. Reagan's warning almost in jest, as if to say, "You see how silly Reagan was, worrying about Eldridge Cleaver! Why, in 1982, he was booed by Yale's Afro-American student society for supporting Reagan."

Yes, but that was in 1982. Born in Arkansas in 1935, Cleaver grew up in the Watts section of Los Angeles. His father was a dining car waiter, his mother worked as a janitor. His childhood was marked by a string of petty crimes and convictions. He was first sent to prison in 1954, when he was eighteen, for possession of marijuana. Released in 1957, he was soon arrested again, this time for rape and attempted murder. It was while serving a two-to-fourteen-year sentence for these crimes that Cleaver immersed himself in the writings of various

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revolutionary authors (Marx, Tom Paine, Lenin, Bakunin, et al.), black American writing (Richard Wright, James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois), and the gritty beginnings of countercultural bombast (Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs). Starting to write himself, Cleaver, through his lawyer, came to the notice of various literary figures, including Norman Mailer, who petitioned the authorities to have Cleaver paroled. (Helping to get scribbling violent criminals—especially ones who professed admiration for his work—out of jail became something of a habit with Norman Mailer. In the early 1980s, he helped get the murderer Jack Abbot released from prison. Abbot promptly stabbed and killed a waiter in New York and was placed beyond even Mailer's intercession.)

Cleaver was catapulted to fame in 1968 with the publication of his book *Soul on Ice*. Written almost entirely while he was in Folsom Prison, the book is a loosely knit series of letters and essays about race relations in America, prison life, one or two black literary figures, and, above all, Cleaver's sexual obsessions, especially his obsession with white women. ("Desire for the white woman," he wrote, "is like a cancer eating my heart out.") Most of the book had first appeared in *Ramparts* magazine, the incendiary, radical-Left monthly on whose masthead Cleaver later appeared as an editor. The book is remarkable partly for its rage, partly for its embarrassing sentimentality. On the one hand, Cleaver concludes an essay on Malcolm X with the warning that "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it." On the other, his concluding piece, "To All Black Women, From All Black Men," is full of hortatory appeals such as this: "let me drink from the river of your love at its source, let the lines of force of your love seize my soul by its core and heal the wound of my Castration, let my convex exile end its haunted Odyssey in your concave essence, . . ." etc.

Soul on Ice is not a good book. Indeed, it is barely a book at all: more a collection of manifestoes and imprecations. But in its day it had an enormous influence and reputation. It was widely assigned in schools and colleges (I first came across it in high school), and it is still in print, thirty years later, in a mass-market edition. The introduction, by the critic Maxwell Geismar, established the tenor of the book's reception: "Cleaver is simply one of the best cultural critics now writing. . . . He rakes our favorite prejudices with the savage claws of his prose until our wounds are bare, our psyche is exposed, and we must either fight back or laugh with him for the service he has done us."

Here, from the book's title essay, is a sample of what "one of the best cultural critics" then writing sounds like:

> I'd like to leap the whole last mile and grow a beard and don whatever threads the local nationalism might require and comrade with Che Guevara, and share his fate, blazing a new pathfinder's trail through the stymied upbeat brain of the New Left, or how I'd just love to be in Berkeley right now, to roll in that mud, frolic in that sty of funky revolution, to breathe in its heady fumes, and look with roving eyes for a new John Brown, Eugene Debs, a blacker-meaner-keener Malcolm X, a Robert Franklin Williams with less rabbit in his hot blood, an American Lenin, Fidel, a Mao-Mao, A MAO MAO, A MAO MAO, A MAO MAO, A MAO MAO, A MAO MAO, A MAO MAO. . . . All of which is true [ellipses in original].

Actually, that's only part of what Cleaver sounds like. As another critic noted, the book is also full of that "grand, old-fashioned Lawrentian and Maileresque myth-making" (this was meant as praise):

> Each half of the human equation, the male and female hemispheres of the Primeval Sphere, must prepare themselves for the fusion by achieving a Unitary Sexual Image. . . . The quest for the Apocalyptic Fusion will find optimal conditions only in a Classless Society, the absence of classes being the *sine qua non*

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> for the existence of a Unitary Society in which the Unitary Sexual Image can be achieved.

If it seems difficult to understand why such babbling should earn widespread respect, remember that Norman Mailer had wowed critical opinion a decade earlier with equally profound observations, *viz*: "the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love. Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it."

By itself, Cleaver's Mailerian rhetoric would have earned him kudos, but not adoration. For that, he needed the added spice of racially infused criminality. Here is the passage that, perhaps more than any other, won Cleaver his converts:

> I became a rapist. To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto—in the black ghetto where dark and vicious deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the norm, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of the day—and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. I did this consciously, deliberately, willfully, methodically—though looking back I see that I was in a frantic, wild, and completely abandoned frame of mind.
>
> Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women—and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman. I felt I was getting revenge.

Had he been left at liberty, he notes, he undoubtedly would have "slit some white throats."

Of course, Cleaver includes a few words of contrition; he was, he admits, "wrong"; in the end, he "could not approve of rape." But what made his reputation—as much among whites as among blacks—was the militancy: his infamous image of "rape as an insurrectionary act," not his qualifying remarks; his slogan "If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem," not his later concessions. (Since he was "an extremist by nature," Cleaver reasoned, "it is only right that I should be extremely sick.") There were a few dissenting notices. David Evanier writing in *The New Leader* was perhaps most accurate when he noted that "the style throughout . . . is pop Leftism, a mixture of sex and revolution characteristic of the New Left." But such demurrals were vastly overshadowed by the praise. "Original and disturbing" (*The Saturday Review*); full of "revolutionary zeal" (*The New York Times Book Review*); "a new stirring of experience" (*The New York Review of Books*); "beautifully written. . . . [a] brilliant book" (*The Nation*), etc. The *Times* even declared *Soul on Ice* one of the ten best books of the year.

Perhaps the most egregious act of critical adulation came from the Yale professor Richard Gilman. In a long review called "White Standards and Negro Writing" in *The New Republic*, Gilman trotted out all the usual adjectives: *Soul on Ice* was "unsparing," "tough," "lyrical," admittedly "foolish at times" but "extraordinarily convincing in the energy and hard morale of its thinking." What made Gilman's essay notable, however, was not its praise but its effort to place Cleaver outside not only "white standards" of literary achievement but also "white standards" of legality. According to Gilman, writing by blacks like Cleaver "remains in some sense unassimilable for those of us who aren't black" because "the Negro doesn't feel the way whites do, nor does he think like whites." In contemporary America, he writes, "moral and intellectual 'truths' have not the same reality for Negroes and whites." (Note the scare quotes: does Gilman doubt there are such things are intellectual and moral truths?) Because "Negro suffering is not of the same kind as ours," he does not, as a white critic, have the "right" to compare Cleaver's thinking with "other 'classic' ways of grappling with sexual experience" or "to subject his findings to the

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scrutiny of the tradition." In short, "white criteria" are out of place in judging works like *Soul On Ice*.

Had Gilman been a conservative, or had he ventured to offer any substantial criticism of Cleaver's paean justifying black rage, his essay would have quickly been attacked for what it is: a piece of racist claptrap, justifying inferior work—and criminality—on the spurious grounds of racial difference. In the event, however, "White Standards and Negro Writing" was part of the radical propaganda of the day. When a respected critic and professor at Yale University tells his readers that "the Negro doesn't feel the way whites do, nor does he think like whites," is it any wonder that the Black Panthers should include in their "ten-point program" the demand that all black men be exempt from military service? Or the demand that all black prisoners be released from jail "because," as Cleaver explained in an interview, "they haven't had fair trials; they've been tried by all white juries, and that's like being a Jew tried in Nazi Germany"? (Asked whether the Panthers were serious about having all black prisoners released, Cleaver replied: "We don't feel that there's any black man or any white man in any prison in this country who could be compared in terms of criminality with Lyndon Johnson.")

Gilman was among those establishment critics who helped articulate a rationale for the blatant criminality of the Panthers. When Cleaver was involved in a gun battle with the Oakland police in 1968—an encounter that left a young Panther dead and Cleaver and a police officer wounded—his parole was revoked and he was returned to prison. Two months later, he was released when a judge ruled that he was being held as a political prisoner. A higher court overturned that ruling, however, and Cleaver was facing a long prison term on charges of assault and attempted murder. In New York, dependable radicals like Susan Sontag and the actor Gary Merrill demonstrated on his behalf; the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard urged his audiences to donate to the Cleaver defense fund. Cleaver himself managed to flee the country, stopping first in Cuba before setting up a "government in exile" in Algiers (where he was, briefly, a grudging host to Timothy Leary when Leary broke out of prison and fled the country). In his frequent travels, he was given a warm welcome in the Soviet Union (as it then was), Vietnam, and Kim Il Sung's Korea.

Gradually, Cleaver grew disenchanted with his radical political beliefs; he broke with the Panthers in 1971 and moved to Paris; in the early 1970s he claims to have had a mystical vision in which the faces of Marx, Engels, Mao, Castro, and others appeared in the moon, followed by the face of Christ ("I fell to my knees"). Cutting a deal with the authorities, Cleaver returned to the United States in 1975; the attempted murder charge was dropped and he was sentenced to twelve-hundred hours of community service.

Eldridge Cleaver was a serial extremist. The content of his beliefs was negotiable; only his fanaticism was constant. This made him something of a preposterous, indeed a pathetic, figure. But, again, preposterousness is by no means incompatible with malignity. And if Eldridge Cleaver became in his later years a kind of joke, this should not mislead us into thinking that his influence was not, after all, so bad. Like so much about the ethos of the counterculture, the influence of figures like Eldridge Cleaver has been as much in their afterlife as their life. That is to say, the destructiveness of their ideas and example may be most severe not when they first appear and—whether they be championed or castigated—are regarded by one and all as outrageous; on the contrary, the really toxic effects of a cultural revolution begin to be felt only latterly, when the revolution is "over" but its characteristic attitudes have been so widely incorporated into the mainstream of life that they are taken for granted. Only then do the precepts of the counterculture find their way into the realm of habit, taste,

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and feeling, becoming along the way not only ideas that are espoused but also a widely embraced way of life. The critic Myron Magnet touched on this point in *The Dream and the Nightmare* (1993), his astute study of how the misguided "idealism" of the counterculture contributed to the plight of America's underclass:

> Just as you didn't have to frequent singles bars to be affected by the sexual revolution, you didn't have to live in a commune and eat mushrooms to be affected by the counterculture's quest for personal liberation. The new adversary stance toward conventional beliefs and ideals, breathlessly reported by the press and diffused almost instantly among the young, quickly put traditional values on the defensive, making them newly problematic even for those who continued to hold them.

Indeed, a good index of the success of a cultural revolution is the extent to which it has managed to render the ideas and values it set out to subvert not merely "problematic" but inert. A counterculture has really triumphed when it ceases to encounter significant resistance, when its values and unspoken assumptions seem not merely victorious but inevitable.

I was reminded of this recently when reading "A Tale of Two Reactions," a reflection on the dynamics of cultural revolution by Mark Lilla, a political philosopher at New York University. The fact that the essay appeared in *The New York Review of Books* (May 14, 1998) had a certain poignancy, of course, since *The Review* contributed so conspicuously to the counterculture in the 1960s. Professor Lilla's general point is that when a cultural revolution is finally successful, continued opposition is merely "reactionary," that is, pointless and intellectually undignified. He gives two examples. The first is the countercultural revolution of the Sixties. Unlike many people on the Left, Professor Lilla has no interest in denying that this revolution actually took place. Indeed, he argues that the cultural revolution not only happened but also was wildly successful in its effect on public authority, the family, and individual morality (and, he might have added, on cultural and intellectual life). In fact, the cultural revolution has been so successful that conservative resistance—and here he cites this series in *The New Criterion* as Exhibit A—long ago became, in his view, completely otiose and reactionary. Professor Lilla's second example is the so-called "Reagan revolution" of the 1980s. This, too, he says, has been so successful in altering our view of certain economic and political matters that left-wing attacks on "Reaganism"—he cites a series in *The Nation* as an example—are now beside the point or, worse, merely reactionary. (Such attacks, he says, are examples of "progressive reaction.")

In the end, Professor Lilla's basic message is not far from the old advice: "If you can't beat them, join them." But connoisseurs of cultural polemic will see that its effectiveness depends less on its message than on its method. Professor Lilla offers his readers two patently unacceptable extremes and then endeavors to place himself not so much between them as above them: a *tertium quid* of sweet reasonableness—Professor Lilla invokes "a small stream of liberal thought"—uncontaminated by any "reactionary" sentiments. William Hazlitt long ago described the essence of this strategy in his essay on "the common-place critic" who, Hazlitt observed, "believes that truth lies in the middle, between the extremes of right and wrong." What makes Professor Lilla's essay of particular interest is the subtle way he goes about occupying that middle—or, more accurately, "middle"—ground.

One device is a generous deployment of . . . well, let us call it "smoke." Professor Lilla says that conservatives "romanticize the affluent Fifties" and so "are reticent to seek the causes of the cultural revolution there." In fact, many conservative discussions of the counterculture locate its origins in the Beat sensibility of the middle Fifties. That is one reason that this series, for example, has devoted so much space to figures

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like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Norman Mailer, Herbert Marcuse, and Wilhelm Reich, all of whom made their names in the Fifties or earlier.

Then there is the question of causes. Professor Lilla says that "to judge by the essays of Roger Kimball and other conservatives, the cause of the Sixties was quite simply . . . the Sixties. They just happened, as a kind of miracle, or anti-miracle." (Ellipses in the original.) "Why," he asks, "did such a profound revolution take place in America when it did? Let us call this the Tocqueville question." Well, part of what we can call "the Tocqueville answer" was quoted in the first installment of these Reflections: "When great revolutions are successful," Tocqueville wrote in his book on the *ancien régime* and the French Revolution, "their causes cease to exist, and the very fact of their success has made them incomprehensible." All manner of sociological, technological, and demographic phenomena have been adduced to "explain" the rise of the counterculture: a newfound affluence together with the postwar population explosion together with an unprecedented number of people in college; the birth-control pill; increased mobility brought about by widespread private ownership of cars; the Vietnam War. . . . The list is a long one, always pertinent, never conclusive. For the truth is, as Irving Kristol observed in his essay "Countercultures" (1994), "the counterculture was not 'caused,' it was born. What happened was internal to our culture and society, not external to it." Accordingly, the real task for a cultural critic is not etiological—there are a never-ending series of answers to the question "Why?"—but diagnostic and, ultimately, therapeutic. The pathology is real; the problem is to assay its nature and severity and then decide what to do about it.

The strategy of splitting the difference always depends on a bit of conceptual legerdemain. In Professor Lilla's scheme, the key evasion comes in his contention that America's cultural revolution and the policies of the Reagan administration count as "complementary" phenomena. Professor Lilla speaks—as many before him have spoken—of a Reagan "revolution." But that is a PR man's misuse of language. Reagan's policies were important; they were far-reaching; in my judgment, most of them were beneficent. But they did not constitute a revolution. If anything, they were an attempt to undo or palliate a set of social and fiscal policies that have much greater claim to being described as revolutionary: I mean the "welfare state" ideology that began under Franklin Roosevelt and reached its final, malodorous flowering in the "Great Society" of Lyndon Johnson and sclerotic "nanny state" ideology of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Leftists may indeed wail unendingly about the evils of Reaganism; and doubtless they would be better advised to grow up and stop crying about the prosperity Reagan helped to saddle them with.

But it is quite wrong to see in Reagan's policies a revolutionary departure from the past. On the contrary, they count as a small step in the direction of recuperating a main current of American political and economic tradition. Professor Lilla tells his readers that, "thanks to Reagan, most Americans now believe (rightly or wrongly) that economic growth will do more for them than economic redistribution, and that to grow rich is good." Note in passing Professor Lilla's parenthetical remark, which allows him to play both side of the ideological fence he has erected. The main point, however, is that most Americans are clever enough to have figured out this message all on their own: they didn't need Ronald Reagan to tell them that economic growth is a good thing or that, given the choice, they would just as soon be well off, thanks very much. Nor is this a recent development. Professor Lilla wheels on Tocqueville early and often in his essay. But already in 1835, in the first volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observed that he knew "of no country . . . where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men and where a profounder contempt is

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expressed for the theory of the permanent equality of property." I do not think we can blame Reagan for Alexis de Tocqueville.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the reader of Professor Lilla's essay is trying to determine where exactly he stands. His arguments tend to point in one direction, his rhetoric in another. The tone, the atmosphere, the *weather* of "A Tale of Two Reactions" is orthodox left-liberal. But many of the substantial points he raises would seem to support the conservative indictment of the cultural revolution. Professor Lilla even provides detailed summaries of how the cultural revolution has had a devastating effect on everything from private morality to social policy. For example:

> When drug pushers and vagrants are permitted to set the tone in public parks, it is not the police who lose. It is poor urban families who lose their backyards. When children are coddled and undisciplined in the schools, they are the first to suffer, their families next. When universities cater to the whimsical tastes of their students and the aggressive demands of political interests, they cease to be retreats for serious cultivation of the self. When pornography is readily available on cable TV or the World Wide Web, the sleaze merchants profit and we are all demeaned.

Professor Lilla offers these and similar observations as "commonplaces in conservative cultural literature today," and so they are. He says that he thinks that they are "largely correct." He also says that the cultural revolution represents a "plausible metamorphosis" rather than an "alien distortion" of the American tradition. What can this mean? What can it mean when he says that, because "the revolution is over," it is useless to criticize its effects? Professor Lilla correctly notes that "the moral views of 'ordinary Americans' are approaching those" of the "new class" shaped by the cultural revolution. He cites this development as a reason to abandon criticism. But isn't it rather grounds for even deeper alarm? Professor Lilla observes that many Americans today "see no contradiction in holding down day jobs in the unfettered global marketplace . . . and spending weekends immersed in a moral and cultural universe shaped by the Sixties." He is quite right. But is this really a reason for complacency?

Professor Lilla's position is a sophisticated variation on the "but everyone does it" defense. Properly brought up children know that that argument doesn't hold much water, and one must assume that deep down Professor Lilla knows it as well. In the early years of this century, John Fletcher Moulton, a British judge, observed that "there is a widespread tendency to regard the fact that [one] can do a thing as meaning [one] may do it. There can be no more fatal error that this. Between 'can do' and 'may do' ought to exist the whole realm which recognizes the sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste, and all the other things that make life beautiful and society possible." One of the the most destructive effects of America's cultural revolution has been to exacerbate this tendency to the point where the "sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste," and all the rest—everything that Lord Moulton congregated under the memorable category of "obedience to the unenforceable"—has been rendered nugatory. This has plunged our culture into a moral crisis whose dimensions we are only now beginning to reckon. Professor Lilla complains that reactionary sentiment on the Left and the Right has "brought serious political reflection down to absolute zero" and left "the field of common political deliberation" vacant. But as long as he sides with those who "see no contradiction in holding down day jobs in the unfettered global marketplace . . . and spending weekends immersed in a moral and cultural universe shaped by the Sixties," Professor Lilla will find that there is nothing to deliberate about. When a country is occupied by a despotic power, the choices are two: capitulation or resistance. Capitulation is always an easy option; that does nothing to justify the moral evasions it involves.

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Confessional poetry & the artifice of honesty

by David Yezzi

[To] stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head, . . .
—Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"

Honesty, little slut, must you insist
On hearing every dirty word I know
And all my worst affairs? Are impotence,
Insanity, and lying what you lust for?
Your hands are cold, feeling me in the dark.
—Edgar Bowers, "To the Contemporary Muse"

Earlier this year, the London *Times* led the fanfare for Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* with this front-page banner headline: "Revealed: the most tragic literary love story of our time." Hughes's long silence over his life with Sylvia Plath gave way to a din of publicity. There were fawning symposia; prominent first-serial publications; and lengthy articles rehashing the familiar story of celebrity and suicide in all its lurid journalistic appeal. Then came the renewed hubbub from critics on both sides of the thirty-five-year-old debate over who was in fact the victim here—the silent woman (as Janet Malcolm has termed her), Sylvia Plath, a young American genius horribly wronged and survived these many years by her unfeeling husband; or the silent man silent no longer, Ted Hughes, that great lowing ox of British letters, England's hoary poet laureate, and Plath's unjustly vilified and long-suffering literary executor. With few exceptions, the book's positive reviews were as exorbitant as its sales.

Autobiography has been doing big business lately, and, as a prominent installment in the series of bestselling memoirs (albeit in verse), *Birthday Letters* has achieved perhaps the highest visibility of any, outstripping for media attention recent efforts in prose by Mary Karr, Kathryn Harrison, and Caroline Knapp—and quite likely the latest, by Lillian Ross, which is just now making its way. As memoirs go, Hughes's story will be hard to beat. A poetry-prize-winning Smith graduate on a Fulbright to Cambridge meets a smolderingly virile European writer at a party; she leaves that night without her hairband, he with (bleeding?) teeth marks. In months, they are married. Accoutering the drama are kids, betrayals, and breakdowns amid a cast of literati both British and American. The domestic tragedy ends with the heroine's suicide in the family home at the age of thirty, her talent's potential a mystery forever.

With its built-in emotional firepower, *Birthday Letters* is poetry for people who ordinarily would never pick up the stuff—and no surprise, really. The whole narrative plays into the popular image of what a poet should be: tortured, beautiful, and *famous*. In a self-regarding passage from her bestselling book *Prozac Nation*, the glamorous young memoirist Elizabeth Wurtzel pretty much puts her finger on it: at a New York party Wurtzel finds herself in a funk and

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sprawled on a bathroom floor; from the depths of her lithiumless despond she compares herself to Plath and Anne Sexton as well as to a movie star. If Wurtzel's experience is any gauge, for many a disconsolate twenty-something it's a one-to-one correspondence: Winona Ryder, Sylvia Plath. There's nothing particularly novel about placing the artist at the center of the starry universe (or about the artist placing himself there); it's a vanity at least as old as Romanticism. It is this Romantic image of the poet as a personally suffering channeler for emotion and experience that clings to Plath and to her fellow confessional poets Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass, and Robert Lowell. That two of the four were suicides (all were analysands) cruelly adds to our fascination with them.

Poetry itself rarely generates headlines, and the story perhaps missed in all the furor over *Birthday Letters* is that of the confessionals, to which Hughes's book provides an illuminating coda. Hughes is not thought of as writing in a confessional or autobiographical mode, yet it is an obvious one for his chosen subject. (Whether or not it makes for good poetry is another matter.) Confessionalism, despite Plath's prominent role in it, remains a quieter affair than the Hughes-Plath saga but one that has been no less divisive for contemporary writers and critics. Given the lasting popularity of the confessional poets among still-widening circles of readers, they, and their successors, the "postconfessionals," may emerge in years to come as the most influential group of American poets after 1959.

More than any other school, confessional poetry directly and vociferously opposed the "impersonality" argued for by T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." If Eliot's credo was upheld by the New Critics—and by the poets writing during "the tranquilized *Fifties*" (as Lowell deemed them) including Richard Wilbur, Donald Justice, Howard Nemerov, and Anthony Hecht—then by the end of that decade the tide had turned measurably.

What distinguishes confessional poetry's management of autobiography from that of, say, the New York school, and from the lyric in general, is the rawness of its address and the incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect. All poets use their lives for poetry, but not all lives are used similarly. Often the particulars of a poet's life provide the basis for more general speculation, which constitutes the poem's bid for universality. Conversely, in confessional poetry such details can serve to deny universality by delineating the poet as apart and uniquely suffering. The "I" of the poem is meant as a direct representation of the flesh-and-blood poet. Through its enumeration of sins, the confessional poem emerges as a tragic self-portrait, its words inscribed, like Kafka's penal commandments, directly onto the hide of the writer.

Confessionalism is a question of degree. What makes a poem confessional is not only its subject matter—e.g., family, sex, alcoholism, madness—or the emphasis on self, but also the directness with which such things are handled. Unflinching and generally extreme in their diction and address (certainly compared to what preceded them), the poems of Snodgrass, Lowell, Sexton, and Plath comprise a wide tonal range from sad whisper to hectoring squawk. What they have in common, what sets them apart from other poems that incorporate details from life, is their sense of worn-on-the-sleeve self-revelation and their artful simulation of sincerity. By relying on facts, on "real" situations and relationships, for a poem's emotional authenticity, the poet makes an artifice of honesty. Confessional poems, in other words, lie like truth.

Nineteen fifty-nine was the *annus mirabilis* of confessional poetry, the year that Lowell's *Life Studies* and Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* were published. Snodgrass's book won the Pulitzer Prize; Lowell's, the National Book Award. It was in Lowell's acceptance speech that he expounded his notion (with a nod to Claude Lévi-Strauss) of the "raw" and the "cooked." Lowell distinguished between the symbolic, formally re-

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strained, carefully reasoned poetry championed by the New Criticism on the one hand, and the fervor and associative logic of a new personalized poetic on the other. For Lowell, poetry had fallen into a staid, overly decorous kind of expression, into which his rough emotionalism and expanded subject matter were meant to inject new life. Wilbur, an exemplar of the cooked poet, saw it another way. Years earlier, in John Ciardi's *Mid-Century American Poets* (1950), Wilbur stated that

> some writers think of art as a window, and some think of it as a door. If art is a window, then the poem is something intermediate in character, limited, synecdochic, a partial vision of a part of the world. . . . If art is conceived to be a door . . . the artist no longer perceives a wall between him and the world; the world becomes an extension of himself, and is deprived of its reality. The poet's words cease to be a means of liaison with the world; they take the place of the world. This is bad aesthetics—and incidentally, bad morals.

The questionable morality that Wilbur describes is more or less that of Emerson, who, with Whitman ("I am the man, I suffered, I was there"), laid the groundwork of American Romanticism. Emerson envisioned the poet as possessing direct access to the divine, as a creature of noble impulses fettered by the intellect, and as a conduit of pure expression. One does not have to consider deeply to imagine the dangers inherent in this excessive form of egotism, where impulse is unchecked by reason and a first-thought-best-thought automatism is offered as the highest artistic achievement. The extremism of Emersonian expansiveness was to a great extent tempered in the first half of this century by Eliot's notion of the escape from personality and emotion. By mid-century, however, the poetry associated with the New Criticism began to give way to a wide swing back in the other direction. What poets such as Lowell championed was a poetry based more directly on personal experience. Extending Wilbur's metaphor, the poet Mark Doty has noted in his essay "The 'Forbidden Planet' of Character: The Revolutions of the 1950s" (1991) that "a generation of poets would then find it necessary not only to open the windows but to break them, to widen them into doors, and the result would be a revisioning of the entire house."

Confessionalism, while largely an aesthetic rather than a political movement, found strong parallels in the social unease of the late 1950s and the upheavals of the 1960s. At the fore of this aesthetic-cultural shift away from traditional forms (and mores) was that "angelheaded hipster" of the counterculture, Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) set the precedent for the new sexualized and radicalized poetry of self. In addition to expanding the possibilities for poetic subject matter, Ginsberg instigated a trend toward self-revelation (which for him, and for poets such as Adrienne Rich, took on a shrill revolutionary cast). The critic M. L. Rosenthal, in his review of *Howl* for *The Nation*, characterized this new poetry as follows:

> We have had smoking attacks on the civilization before, ironic or murderous or suicidal. We have *not* had this particular variety of anguished anathema-hurling in which the poet's revulsion is expressed with the single-minded frenzy of a raving madman.
>
> Ginsberg hurls, not only curses, but *everything*—his own paranoid memories of a confused, squalid, humiliating existence in the "underground" of American life and culture, [as well as] mock political and sexual "confessions." . . .
>
> . . . It is further evidence, the most telling yet, perhaps, of the Céline-ization of nonconformist attitudes in America. . . . Homogenize the dominant culture enough, destroy the channels of communication blandly enough, and you will have little Mad Bombers everywhere.

(Is it any wonder that Ted Kaczynski's a fan of Paul Goodman?) Ginsberg's "new active

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Romanticism," Rosenthal later observed in *The New York Times Book Review*,

> mirror[s] something that has been going on for a long time—the discrediting by many people of traditional concepts of a nobly disciplined life. . . .

The year after the appearance of *Howl*, Lowell began a reading tour of the West Coast that would alter profoundly his early style of *Lord Weary's Castle* and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*. "At the time," Lowell explained in an interview, "poetry reading was sublimated by the practice of Allen Ginsberg. I was still reading my old New Criticism religious, symbolic poems. . . . Audiences didn't understand, and I didn't always understand myself while reading." "I began to have a certain disrespect for the tight forms," he later admitted. Ginsberg's in-your-face rant, while it cleared new territory for Lowell to move onto, was far from the voice Lowell adopted for *Life Studies*—what the British poet and critic A. Alvarez has called Lowell's more "dispassionate artistic use of material salvaged from the edge of breakdown." Lowell, as a favorite of Allen Tate and a contributor to the inaugural issue of the *Kenyon Review* in 1938, embodied the change from the New Criticism to the confessional. While influenced by Ginsberg, he was too fine a poet to give over entirely to the "barbaric yawp" of the Beats.

Closer in tone to the Lowell of the late Fifties are the poems of William DeWitt Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*. Snodgrass, one of Lowell's students at Iowa, included in his volume poems on the dissolution of his marriage and his fear of estrangement from his young daughter. "Daughter poems" sound a tonic chord in confessionalism with famous examples by Snodgrass, Lowell, Sexton, and Plath. A comparison of these poems reveals the progress of confessional poetry as it descended from the ease of Snodgrass into the violence of Plath.

Just as suicide (Plath's and Sexton's) marked the end of confessional poetry, it marked the beginning as well. As a student at Iowa in the Fifties, a young poet named Robert Shelley began writing poems in a direct style that broke with the fragmented poetry of his peers. He had only completed a handful of these lyrics before taking his own life. As Shelley's fellow student and friend, Snodgrass was taken with this new style and eventually adopted it as his own. Snodgrass's teachers at Iowa, who included Berryman as well as Lowell, he tells us, "really taught me how to pack a poem with meaning, and from that it's a fairly easy jump to how to pack a poem with feeling, which to me tells a lot more." This jump to emotion was a defining move of confessionalism. In his book's title sequence, "Heart's Needle," Snodgrass portrays in delicately turned verses the strained relationship between himself and his daughter. The poem is meant to play directly on the heart strings of the reader:

> This Hallowe'en you come one week.
> You masquerade
> as a vermilion, sleek,
> fat, crosseyed fox in the parade
> or, where grim jackolanterns leer,
>
> go with your bag from door to door
> foraging for treats. How queer:
> when you take off your mask
> my neighbors must forget and ask
> whose child you are.
>
> Of course you lose your appetite,
> whine and won't touch your plate;
> as local law
> I set your place on an orange crate
> in your own room for days. At night
>
> you lie asleep there on the bed
> and grate your jaw.
> Assuredly your father's crimes
> are visited
> on you. You visit me sometimes.
>
> The time's up. Now your pumpkin sees
> me bringing your suitcase.
> He holds his grin;

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the forehead shrivels, sinking in.
You break this year's first crust of snow

off the runningboard to eat.
We manage, though for days
I crave sweets when you leave and know
they rot my teeth. Indeed our sweet
foods leave us cavities.

Lowell admired Snodgrass's ability to risk sentimentality without succumbing to it: "There's some way of distinguishing," Lowell told an interviewer, "between false sentimentality, which is blowing up a subject and giving emotions that you don't feel, and using whimsical, minute, tender, small emotions which most people don't feel" but which, Lowell insisted, Snodgrass did. Snodgrass's tact with regard to the elusive distinction between heightened emotion and false sentimentality is what separates his poems from subsequent strains of confessionalism. "Heart's Needle" employs clean phrasing and a caution with regard to the poet's precarious emotional situation that later poetry in this vein would eschew.

Aside from its occasional datedness ("How queer," "runningboard"), the poem's diction has aged well. Though it's better than most postconfessional personal lyrics, the poem could be written today: such bald statements and unmediated self-regard have become commonplaces. Snodgrass's emotional needs are given center stage. "To know one's needs is really to know one's own limits, hence one's definition," Snodgrass has written. By understanding "needs" as defining "limits," the poet becomes the sum of his desires; by definition, then, he is not so much unfulfilled as unfulfillable. This unhappy state too often gives way to a mawkish self-pity that undermines Snodgrass and his fellows.

Another characteristic that Snodgrass shares with Lowell, Sexton, and Plath is his use of associative logic, which helps to supplant reason with emotion. While on the surface playful, Snodgrass's non sequitur leaps suggest a mind buckling under the strain: "Assuredly your father's crimes/ are visited/ on you. You visit me sometimes.// The time's up." The prickliest reference in the poem—to the sins of the father—seems to jolt Snodgrass off balance as he limps from thought to thought over tenuous bridges of wordplay. It's as if in all the emotional honesty, he can no longer think straight.

Similarly racing is Lowell's mind in "Home After Three Months Away," one of his daughter poems from *Life Studies*:

Three months, three months!
Is Richard now himself again?
Dimpled with exaltation,
my daughter holds her levee in the tub.
Our noses rub,
each of us pats a stringy lock of hair—
they tell me nothing's gone.
Though I am forty-one,
not forty now, the time I put away
was child's-play. After thirteen weeks
my child still dabs her cheeks
to start me shaving. When
we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,
she changes to a boy,
and floats my shaving brush
and washcloth in the flush. . . .
Dearest, I cannot loiter here
in lather like a polar bear.

Neither can Lowell loiter on a thought. The poem, bordering on the sentimental, takes place on the poet's first weekend visit home from McLean Hospital where he has been committed and undergoing treatment for manic-depression. The poignancy of the closing couplet, as Lowell's biographer Ian Hamilton points out, is increased by knowing that Lowell may not "loiter" in the added sense of having to return to the hospital. In recuperation, Lowell "'came to' sad, worried, always ashamed and fearful," Lowell's second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, has explained. This nervous energy that she describes seems just below the surface of this poem for Harriet, Lowell's daughter with Hardwick: the poem fidgets, restively skipping back and forth between outward and inward observation. As the critic Don-

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ald Davie has put it, "Now we have once again poems in which the public life of the author as author, and his private life, are messily compounded, so that one needs the adventitious information of the gossip-columnist to take the force or even the literal meaning of what, since it is a work of literary art, is supposedly offered as public utterance." Of course, much can be gotten from Lowell's poetry without such special knowledge, but not everything.

In the opening of "Home After Three Months Away," Lowell sets the scene with biographical detail:

> Gone now the baby's nurse,
> a lioness who ruled the roost
> and made the Mother cry.
> She used to tie
> gobbets of porkrind in bowknots of gauze—
> three months they hung like soggy toast
> on our eight foot magnolia tree,
> and helped the English sparrows
> weather a Boston winter.

This account is an artist's admixture of fact and fiction. The nurse was, in fact, let go and did on one occasion make Harriet's mother, Hardwick, cry. She did not, however, leave out unseemly snacks for the birds; this was the practice of Lowell's next-door neighbor. Tampering with the facts, of course, does not weaken the poem, just the opposite. It is the poetic strategy of presenting them as facts that poses the greatest difficulty. As Lowell admitted in a *Paris Review* interview, "There's a good deal of tinkering with fact [in *Life Studies*] . . . the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell." Lowell handled this illusion of honesty, in the main, with seriousness and responsibility. With Plath and Sexton, such "honesty" feels more like emotional strongarming. Lowell, in describing his recovery, manages to convey the "whimsical, minute, tender, small emotions" that he revered in Snodgrass. Too often, Plath and Sexton succumb to "blowing up a subject" in a way that Lowell equated with "false sentimentality."

A responsibility accompanies the transformation of one's own image into art. Over confessional poetry, Davie argues, "falls the shadow of a divided purpose: the poet confesses to discreditable sentiments or behavior, but in doing so he demands credit for having the courage or the honesty of his shamelessness." Like Lowell, Anne Sexton, a stalwart of such poetic shamelessness, came to confessionalism in part through the writing of Snodgrass, whose "Heart's Needle," she gushed, "grew like a bone inside of my heart." Sexton attended a week-long workshop at Antioch College expressly to study with Snodgrass (she later studied with Lowell at Boston University), but her own poetry displays a more extreme sensibility, as shown by such titles as "The Abortion," "Menstruation at Forty," "Suicide Note," "The Breast," "In Celebration of My Uterus," "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator," "Dreaming the Breasts," and "God's Backside."

Written in the fall of 1958 and addressed to her daughter Joyce (nicknamed "Joy"), Sexton's "Double Image" was begun under the direct influence of Snodgrass. The long poem incorporates in its seven sections details taken from Sexton's mental disorder, hospitalization, family custody battles, and multiple suicide attempts:

> I am thirty this November.
> You are still small, in your fourth year.
> We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
> flapping in the winter rain,
> falling flat and washed. And I remember
> mostly the three autumns you did not live
> here.
> They said I'd never get you back again.
> I tell you what you'll never really know:
> all the medical hypothesis
> that explained my brain will never be as true
> as these
> struck leaves letting go.
>
> I, who chose two times
> to kill myself, had said your nickname
> the mewling months when you first came;
> until a fever rattled

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in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me.
The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled
your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume.

The poem, published in Sexton's first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), reads like an alloy of "Heart's Needle" and "Home After Three Months Away." As in Lowell, the poet's age is stated, as well as the poet's period of separation from the daughter. Both poets employ metaphors for psychic unease: for Lowell it's tulips in the snow; for Sexton, leaves in the rain. But where Lowell conveys his mental disturbance ("I keep no rank nor station./ Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small") with modulation and restraint, Sexton goes for broke. Doom engulfs the poet at the end of the passage quoted above like some oozing creature from a B horror film. Occasionally, Sexton happens on a lovely turn of phrase ("these/ struck leaves letting go"), but the nursery language she often used to creepy effect seems willed here. It's hard to say which is worse, Sexton's blandly disclosed suicide attempts, or the fact that she's directing all of it to her daughter. Sexton's woeful inability to see beyond herself isn't moving, it's depressing.

Sexton's complaint later in the poem that "There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,/ why did I let you grow/ in another place," apart from being a sentimental cliché, plays into an important observation made by the critic Charles Molesworth:

> In the poetry of Plath and Sexton, we find not only the subject matter but the structure of their imagination returning again and again to an irreducible choice: either the poet must become God or resign consciousness altogether. Haunted by the failed myth of a human, or at least an artistic, perfectibility, they turned to a courtship of nihilism. The suicides of Plath and Sexton . . . come into starkest relief not against the myth of the alienated modern artist, but rather against the ruptured gigantism of their own egos.

To invert Wilbur's formulation, not only is this bad morals, it's also bad aesthetics. One could argue that Sexton's poems are perfect expressions of a troubled mind; the trick in poetry is not to succumb to an imitation of inner chaos but to render it as precisely as possible from the outside, to view it through a wider angle than the poet's own myopia.

Sylvia Plath's poems, like Sexton's, poach on already charged icons for emotional effect. For Plath and Sexton, God was a sitting duck (so were Nazis). Where Sexton might write "She is the house./ He is the steeple./ When they fuck they are God," Plath would intone "The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God." Lest anyone misunderstand, these lines are not serious musings on the nature of the divine; rather, they rely on some travesty of divinity for an emotional lift. In "The God," from *Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes makes his own observations on Plath's dark obsession with divinity:

"God is speaking through me," you told me.
"Don't say that," I cried. "Don't say that.
That is horribly unlucky!"
As I sat there with blistering eyes
Watching everything go up
In the flames of your sacrifice
That finally caught you too till you
Vanished, exploding
Into the flames
Of the story of your God
Who embraced you
And your Mummy and your Daddy—
Your Aztec, Black Forest
God of the euphemism Grief.

(Hughes's poems in his recent collection read like middling Sexton with an infusion from Anglo-Saxon—"Your God snuffed up the fatty reek.") After reading "The God,"

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one turns to Plath's *Ariel* (1965) and reread "Daddy," Plath's daughter poem in reverse. When Plath wasn't deifying herself, she was deifying and un-deifying the figure of her father ("a bag full of God") for the purpose of ridicule:

> I have always been scared of *you*,
> With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
> And your neat mustache
> And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
> Panzer-man, panzer-man, O you—
>
> Not God but a swastika
> So black no sky could squeak through.
> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you.
>
> You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
> In the picture I have of you,
> A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
> But no less a devil for that, no not
> Any less than the black man who
>
> Bit my pretty red heart in two.
> I was ten when they buried you.
> At twenty I tried to die
> And get back, back, back to you.
> I thought even the bones would do.

It is possible to admire the originality, the keening and crackle, of Plath's screed, yet to remain deeply suspicious of the ego that would equate filial grief with the atrocities of the Holocaust. Such an inflation of emotion, to recall Lowell's thinking on the matter, seems a particularly dangerous form of sentimentality—not to mention solipsism. Such magnesium flashes of emotion are blinding, not illuminating. Plath's antic intensifications can feel deeply dispiriting.

In 1958, Plath audited—with Sexton—Lowell's poetry class at Boston University. (The three also have in common McLean Hospital, where at various times each underwent treatment.) Plath wrote that, in their poetry class, Lowell "sets me up with Anne Sexton, an honor I suppose," but the two became only distant friends and very different poets. For Sexton getting out the "story" was paramount, while for Plath, a far more striking poet in the end, the aim was to transform the personal into a private symbolic language. What the two poets shared was their emotional extremism. As Plath put it, "My main thing now is to start with real things; real emotions, and leave out the baby gods . . . and get into me, Ted, friends, mother and brother and father and family. The real world. Real situations, behind which the great gods play the drama of blood, lust and death."

Reading "Daddy" is like visiting a patient in a burn unit: the power of the poetry derives from our realization that recovery—if possible—may only be partial. Lowell at one point admitted that some people might read his poems out of a fascination with the guilty biographical material recounted there. This same extraliterary fascination elevated Plath's readership, after the publication of *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *Ariel*, into something approaching a cult. It is ironic that Plath's poetry, which transformed biography into a highly original iconography of hate and despair, would become inseparable from the details of her life for subsequent generations of readers.

With *Birthday Letters*, Hughes shows us another important aspect of the story, but the "story" does a disservice to his poetry. Hughes strains under a divided duty: to serve the poems and to serve the facts. While affecting in passages, the book most often founders under the weight of its own biographical and psychological content. Even so, despite the renewed feminist attacks that accompanied the appearance of the *Letters*, Hughes the man has triumphed: if his goal was partly a measure of exoneration (private or public), then he has got it. He's made his case. What he has not done is return to the height of his poetic powers. This to a good extent may be a problem of autobiographical poetry these many years after confessionalism; for the best poets of the late Fifties and early Sixties, and most notably for Lowell, a poem could not subsist on biography alone—it still can't.

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The problem of democratic history

by Keith Windschuttle

Historians who write in aristocratic ages are inclined to refer all occurrences to the particular will and character of certain individuals; and they are apt to attribute the most important revolutions to slight accidents. They trace out the smallest causes with sagacity, and frequently leave the greatest unperceived. Historians who live in democratic ages exhibit precisely opposite characteristics. Most of them attribute hardly any influence to the individual over the destiny of the race, or to citizens over the fate of a people; but, on the other hand, they assign great general causes to all petty incidents.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, conservative governments in both the United States and the United Kingdom invested heavily in programs to redefine the study of history and to redraft the curricula for teaching history in high schools. They did this for three reasons: surveys had demonstrated young people had an appalling level of ignorance about their societies' major historical events; the proportion of students studying history had declined in recent decades from a large majority to a small minority; and they were concerned about the rise of political correctness in history teaching, especially the denigration of the achievements of Western culture and an overemphasis on claims about the oppression of the lower classes, women, and ethnic groups.

The governments of both countries believed they were canvassing a broad body of opinion when they filled their curriculum revision programs with a cross section of teachers from public, religious, and private schools, as well as representatives of parent-teacher groups, academic bodies, and scholarly and public interest associations. However, they were horrified at the outcome. Not only did the new syllabuses enshrine an even greater degree of political correctness than their sponsors had imagined possible, but they omitted the teaching of a significant number of those great landmarks of history upon whose paucity of public recognition the whole reform process had been predicated. In Britain, the first draft of the new curriculum left out the Protestant Reformation, Elizabeth I, World War I, and the history of Ireland.

In the United States, Lynne Cheney, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the Bush administration and the chief initiator of the National History Standards, denounced the outcome for its "grim and gloomy" portrayal of American history and for reserving unqualified admiration for the representatives of multiculturalism and identity politics: "Imagine an outline for the teaching of American history," she complained, "in which George Washington makes only a fleeting appearance and is never described as our first president. Or in which the founding of the Sierra Club and the National Organization for Women are considered noteworthy

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events but the first gathering of the U.S. Congress is not." She noted that a black woman, Harriet Tubman, who assisted slaves to escape, was given six references while Ulysses S. Grant was referred to only once, and other notable white males such as Robert E. Lee, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Jonas Salk, and the Wright Brothers were mentioned not at all.

This conservative dismay at the product of its own initiative was soon transposed to the media where, for the first time in decades, the high-school history syllabus became a matter of intense public debate. Radio talk-show hosts and newspaper columnists weighed in with a largely critical expression of opinion. University professors, both for and against, signed letters to the editors of the leading newspapers. Political action quickly followed. In November 1994, the Republican-dominated U.S. Senate made an unprecedented intervention into the debate by voting to prevent two government educational bodies from certifying the National History Standards that Cheney had originated. Soon after, the U.S. standards were submitted to review by a small group of university historians. In the end, a great deal of the more contentious material was eliminated from both the British and American syllabuses and a slightly more conservative approach was accepted by the drafting committees, albeit reluctantly.

Three of the members of the body that wrote the American National History Standards, Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, have now produced a book describing these events.[1] They trace the project from the brief given by Lynne Cheney, to the formation and deliberations of the drafting committees, and to what they describe as "the Right Wing assault" on the finished product. They also include a chapter on attempts at the same thing in other countries including Germany, Japan, South Africa, and, in most detail, Britain. Theirs is not a disinterested account. Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn write from an openly leftist position: "We make no claim to being nonpartisan academic observers of the history war." Nonetheless, they produce enough detail about the events and sufficient verbatim quotations from the participants to enable an observer who does not share their politics to come to his own conclusions.

Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn see the contest for the curriculum in terms of a fairly simplistic Left versus Right political stoush. The Left supported multiculturalism and feminism and tried to use the history syllabus to enshrine these principles in the education system. The Right supported a traditionalist curriculum. The authors regard their own position not so much as politically loaded but as up-to-date, popular with students, justified by current theories of historical method, and, above all, inherently democratic.

As one might expect, they regard their opposition as old-fashioned, theoretically naïve, boring, and elitist. One might well ask what the Bush administration thought it was doing when it recruited people with such predilections, but it is highly likely that any broadly representative recruiting process would have produced much the same result. For it is plain that the views of these authors represent a consensus not only among the Left but among the history teaching profession as a whole. Their own evidence for this is convincing. "Altogether," they argue, "the participants [on the drafting committee] probably spanned the central part of the political spectrum; ideologues of either the Right or the Left were not to be found." Some members were active Republicans; others regarded themselves as apolitical and were astonished at the condemnation they received. Two of the latter commented:

> All of the classroom teachers who wrote the standards and developed the activities are mainstream educators with long experience in

1 *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, by Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn; Knopf, 318 pages, $26.

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> the classroom and are highly regarded by their colleagues, by students, and by parents. To be labelled as some sort of left-wing radicals by critics such as Mrs. Cheney is an injustice to classroom teachers everywhere.

In other words, the concepts embodied in what conservatives have seen as political correctness, identity politics, and multiculturalism represent not merely the dominance of the Left within the education system but how mainstream classroom instructors now conceive of the writing and teaching of history today. How did such a state of affairs come to pass?

One of the major appeals of the multiculturalist platform is the way its proponents have identified it with democratic ideals. Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn talk about the creation of "a history education that is fit for a democratic society" which at the same time "represents a commitment to multiculturalism." They note that the last few decades have witnessed "a remarkable effort to broaden the scope of history education to ensure that the experiences of all classes, regions and ethnoracial groups, as well as both genders, are included in it." A glance at current textbooks, syllabuses, and teacher-training programs, they observe, will confirm the growth of this movement which "expresses an allegiance to the democratic notion that our history should reflect the experiences, contributions, aspirations and travails of all the nation's people." They want to overturn Thomas Carlyle's definition, inscribed in the rotunda of the Library of Congress, that "history is the biography of great men," or, as they put it, of "great white Protestant men." Instead, history should become

> an examination of vast dimensions of the human experience heretofore unnoticed. Why should a democratic people dedicated to equality not applaud the attention now given to the roles in history of women, African Americans, working people, religious denominations, and other groups relatively powerless in the formal political sense? . . . Is this the voice of "political correctness" or a recognition of the link between a democratic society and a more historically complete and accurate rendering of the past? . . . That American history textbooks until recently left out the record of common folk seems extraordinary in a democratic society where we live by the motto "of, for, and by the people."

Extraordinary though it might seem to these authors, there are very good reasons why history once paid only a small degree of attention to many of these worthy groups, and why it focused so much attention on white Protestants of the male gender. Until the last thirty years, most of the history that had been written was in the form of a narrative of causes. Most people who read history books did so because they wanted to know why their society took the form it did and how it responded to its major challenges. Historians usually answered this demand in terms of how authority had been determined and deployed, and they invoked causes of a political, military, and legal nature. The "common folk" and most of the now familiar sexual and ethnic identity groups played only intermittent roles in this account, usually in periods of civil unrest or in spasmodic mass phenomena such as migration. This was because for most of the time most of the people were not causally effective: they were the objects rather than the agents of history; they were on the receiving end of major historic events, not their instigators.

Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn unwittingly confirm this very point themselves. In discussing recent attempts by feminist historians to argue for an important role for American women in the Revolution of 1776, they list the following contributions: women provided food for armies on the march, they were fundraisers for the war effort, they acted as nurses for the wounded and as "companions" for soldiers in the campgrounds and the battlefields. Surely it is obvious to anyone with even a passing famil-

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iarity with these events that all this is clutching at straws and is special pleading of a pathetic kind. While there were no doubt women who undertook all these activities, their efforts were insignificant compared to the commercial supply of provisions, fund-raising by political associations, and the treatment of the wounded by male surgeons.

It is true that every army that has ever fought on its own soil has thereby gained some advantage from its domestic supporters, but it beggars all credulity to claim that the role of women in 1776 was in any way decisive to the outcome. The American Revolution was initiated and won almost entirely by the efforts of those great white Protestant men who are now so much of an anathema to the multiculturalists. Moreover, the contribution made by two other currently revered identity groups, blacks and American Indians, is even more of a multicultural embarrassment, because those of them who expressed any opinion about the Revolution at the time all supported the British.

I should emphasize that none of this means it is impossible to write acceptable scholarly histories of women and ethnic groups. It is perfectly legitimate, for instance, to write an account of the history of the domestic activities of women at the time of the Revolution, or at any other period, or to describe the condition of indigenous peoples before or after their contact with Europeans, even though neither group may have had an important impact on mainstream political history. Works of this kind can be of considerable interest to readers, especially those who are members of the groups concerned, and largely for this reason they have provided the impetus for the emergence of social history as a major field within the discipline since the 1960s.

Nevertheless, this approach to history has at least four drawbacks that render it far less suitable than the traditional version to form the basis of an educational program. First, accounts of this kind are never, in themselves, sufficient to provide a complete explanation of the circumstances of the lives of the people discussed. Their intelligibility is invariably dependent upon a familiarity with the chief historical events, landmarks and structures of authority provided by more orthodox accounts, and which would still need to be taught. No proper explanation of the position of women, for instance, should omit their relationships with men or with public affairs; nor can the condition of the industrial working classes be understood separate from the role of the middle and upper classes, especially those who were their employers, or from the political connections between all three. Second, these accounts normally take the form of a relatively static descriptive analysis of their chosen groups rather than a sequential narrative. This means that the crucial historical dimension of change over time is either played down or omitted entirely, thus depriving the work of chronological and causal explanation. Third, despite G. M. Trevelyan's famous dictum that social history is "history with the politics left out," many of these works have hidden political agendas which, while they may not be apparent to the student reader, nonetheless determine their whole rationale. More on this below.

The fourth problem with the authors' notion of democratic history is its lack of coherence. If one abandoned the traditional approach based on a narrative of major events and their causes in favor of equal time for every identifiable sexual and ethnic group, history would lose its explanatory power and degenerate into a tasteless blancmange of worthy sentiment. There would be no integrated story to be told that could link political, economic, military, and technological events into an intelligible framework. Hence, it would be impossible to achieve the goals of explaining either national development or, as both the American and British curriculum committees were commissioned to define, the nation's place in world affairs. Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn are aware of this last objection and

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offer a reply to it. It is worth quoting at some length because it demonstrates much of the rhetorical appeal of their case.

> Can a plurality of stories and jarring perspectives fit into a coherent understanding of the American past? Quite simply, the particularities of social history can be mainstreamed readily enough by changing the governing narrative from the rise of democracy, defined in terms of electoral politics, to the struggle to fulfill the American ideals of liberty, equal justice and equality. This new narrative, arising out of a democratized historical practice, would speak to contests and conflicts over power and how such contests reflect the long struggles among various groups to elbow their way under the canopy of the nation's founding promises. . . . Can there be any grand narrative more powerful, coherent, democratic, and inspiring than the struggles of groups that have suffered discrimination, exploitation, and hostility but have overcome passivity and resignation to challenge their exploiters, fight for legal rights, resist and cross racial boundaries, and hence embrace and advance the American credo that "all men are created equal"?

This reply deserves to set alarm bells ringing among all those nonpolitical classroom teachers who have so far welcomed the National History Standards. To teach history as fundamentally a story of struggle against discrimination, exploitation, and hostility is to commit a great and unpardonable sin. The story is false. The idea that the history of the United States or of Britain, or indeed of the majority of Western countries, could be described this way should be convincing only to the most hardened ideologue. For example, the feminist claim that the history of women is essentially one of conflict with authoritarian patriarchs is belied not only by the everyday experience of the vast majority of ordinary people but by the feminists' own writings. What, for instance, did all those women imagine they were doing when they supplied food, companionship, and nursing care to their purported oppressors, the American revolutionaries?

Similarly, the claim that the history of nonwhite and non-English speaking ethnic groups is essentially one of exploitation is belied by the extraordinary degree of social mobility achieved, often in one generation, by those same ethnic groups in every English-speaking country in the world. One would, of course, have to be blind not to recognize that some ethnic groups suffer long-term and deeply entrenched problems, but to blow these up to the point where they define the whole of the history of either the nation or the "common folk" is a willfully dishonest exaggeration.

Alexis de Tocqueville, as the opening quotation records, made a useful differentiation between the tendencies found in history writing in different eras. Soon after he wrote these words in 1835–40, however, historians began the attempt to rise above these distinctions. While preserving the prominence given by aristocratic culture to the influence wielded by the actions of great men, they also tried to incorporate the emphasis that a democratic age placed on social structures, mass movements, and the influence of economic and demographic pressures on the course of events. Through methods of scholarship they regarded as objective—by which they meant their arguments were based entirely on openly cited evidence that could be corroborated or challenged by others—they hoped to produce a disinterested history that transcended the ideologies of their times.

Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn dismiss this notion as both out-of-date and politically contaminated. "Modern historiography," they assure us, "has taught us that historians can never fully detach their scholarly work from their own education, attitudes, ideological dispositions and culture." Disinterested scholarship "is not simply an uneducated view. It is also an ideological position of traditionalists and the political Right that particular facts, traditions, and heroic personalities, all untainted by 'interpretation,'

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represent the 'true' and 'objective' history that citizens ought to know."

Nevertheless, the version of history that they offer in its place not only repeats the faults Tocqueville ascribes to the democratic era, but also is as ideologically polluted as any ever devised. Beneath its rhetoric lies a perspective that has a long and disreputable track record and which has produced some notoriously antidemocratic conclusions. It is, in fact, a marginally modified restatement of the Marxist theory that the history of all previous generations is the history of class struggle.

The approach to historical research endorsed by Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn was born in the 1960s under the names of "social history" and "history from below." Its most celebrated creators were the British Marxist historians Edward Thompson, author of *The Making of the English Working Class*, and Eric Hobsbawm, at the time best known for his history of European revolutions and the British labor movement. For Marxist theory, the study of the history of "common folk" is an important issue, for many are members of what Marxism defines as the proletariat, the industrial workers destined to lead the revolution that will replace capitalism with Communism. Hence the first book by Marx's collaborator, Friedrich Engels, was *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845).

Thompson and Hobsbawm, however, brought far more than the usual Marxist theoretical dogma to their work, which displayed considerable sensitivity to the lives of ordinary people, discovering some genuine working-class heroes, and coloring their work in warm romantic hues. Although in the 1990s Marxism and Communism have lost all intellectual credibility and political appeal, the style and methodologies pioneered by these two authors have nonetheless now permeated a far wider range of historical topics, research, and writing. History from below has become mainstream. Politically, this has allowed the Left to change horses, to abandon the blue collar work force, and to pin its hopes for social change on the constituents of the now familiar identity groups. By defining people into such groups and presenting them with their own social histories that show them to be victims of an unconscionable oppression, radical politics has enjoyed a conspicuous rejuvenation.

There are at least two prominent examples of the political success won through this approach. The first is in the United Kingdom, where in 1997 the plebiscites for devolution demonstrated that there are now majorities in Scotland and Wales who have been persuaded they should emulate the Irish and seek their independence from the burden of English imperialism. The second is the example of the indigenous peoples of the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand who are using the history of their maltreatment as moral justification for demanding that they be given self-government with their own custom-based legal systems and that their own territory be carved out of the existing nations. There are few signs at present that the governments of the latter countries will cede these demands, but, given the cohorts of high-school students who are now being taught nothing but the downside of the relationship with indigenes, there may well emerge before long a whole younger generation of nonindigenous voters willing to support them.

The logical consequence of these developments is ethnic separatism, or what some U.S. critics have described as "the Balkanization of America." Samuel Huntington, Jr., has argued: "The American multiculturalists reject their country's cultural heritage. . . . They wish to create a country of many civilizations, which is to say a country not belonging to any civilization and lacking a cultural core. History shows that no country so constituted can long endure as a coherent society." Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn dismiss these concerns as alarmist. To display their impartiality, they offer some criticisms of claims by American Afrocentrist propagandists that African society is supe-

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rior to European society and was, via ancient Egypt's influence on Greece, the true founder of Western civilization. But even after they have jettisoned such discredited notions, their conflict model of history remains profoundly depressing. It is predicated upon a framework of heroes and villains in which the truth is nowhere to be found. The villains are the originators and upholders of Western culture in whose hands Western history becomes little more than a chronicle of Western crimes. The heroes are those alleged victims of the same culture who, in reality, have played the smallest roles, and in some cases no role at all, in its development.

Within such boundaries, the true cultural heritage of Europe and its offspring is totally silenced. It is hard to imagine a creed more demoralizing or more destructive of Western values. Ironically, conflict models of history reflect one of the great strengths of Western culture. The self-criticism on which they are based was built into the culture from the start and, arguably, has been the source of much of its innovation and dynamism ever since. Moreover, the freedom to express such criticism has been one of the most cherished possessions of those who have inherited the culture. Most of the radical movements of the past two hundred years, while highly critical of many aspects of Western culture, have nonetheless seen themselves (however deluded they might have been) as fulfilling that culture, or taking it to a higher plane, or at least saving it from itself.

The multiculturalist movement is qualitatively different. It is self-criticism without redemptive features: self-criticism turned to self-hatred. It is a total critique of the West that derides many of the West's greatest achievements as its greatest failings. Some older, one-time radicals saw this very clearly when the National History Standards were published. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese observed:

> Nowhere in those standards . . . will you find any mention of the fact that it was the Western tradition that first produced the idea of individual freedom. Nowhere will you find that it was in Christianity that the concept of individual freedom originated. That slavery is evil is a Western idea. Because the bias of the standards is so weighted against the United States and the West, you will find no acknowledgment of the fact that we have produced what no other country and tradition has.

It is worth adding that no other culture, either now or in the past, would ever have been so foolish as to contemplate, let alone advocate, the education of its children on principles so lacking in self-awareness, so unrelentingly self-critical, and so potentially self-destructive.

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Victor Hugo: the dangerous master

by Renee Winegarten

Victor Hugo (1802–1885) was—and is—altogether too much. A prolific lyric and epic poet of stunning technical mastery, he was also a controversial dramatist (some of his plays have survived as subjects for operas of Donizetti, Verdi, and Ponchielli). He wrote two of the most enduringly popular novels, *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Les Misérables*. Quasimodo the pathetic monster and Jean Valjean the ex-convict tormented by conscience are known—even if approximately and secondhand through numerous stage and film adaptations—to many who have not read the books and probably have no intention of reading them. Moreover, Hugo was a visionary artist not only in word but also with pen, wash, and mixed media. He appears as the bard of every regime except one—and France in his day saw a goodly number. At various times he also served as *député* and senator. Hugo towers with those nineteenth-century French contemporaries like Balzac, Dumas *père*, and George Sand, writers whose vast outpouring of words never ceases to astonish and overwhelm. Yet Hugo, or Olympio, as he was to call himself, self-consecrated genius and monumental egoist, gives the impression of being and displaying more of everything. While his literary influence is immense, he has also exerted a pervasive, lasting, less obvious, and not always salutary influence in spheres that are not purely literary.

Victor Hugo was not born "an aristocrat and royalist," for he was the son of a self-made man who rose from humble origins to be one of Napoleon's generals. General Hugo was zealous in his relentless pursuit of counterrevolutionaries in the Vendée, and brutal in his suppression of *guerrilleros* during the French invasion of Spain. Hugo's mother who, according to the poet, was an aristocrat, devoutly Catholic and monarchist, active in the antirevolutionary uprising in the Vendée, was in fact a Voltairean sceptic (whose family had connections with the infamous Carrier, notorious perpetrator of revolutionary atrocities). She did not have Victor baptized, and he himself never repaired the omission. Of Hugo's two talented brothers, one faded rapidly from the scene while the other died obscurely in an insane asylum. As for Hugo's parents, they quarrelled and separated. His father had a longstanding mistress (whom he would later marry). His mother became deeply involved in the conspiracy of General Malet against Napoleon through her lover General Lahorie, who was executed for his part in the plot.

Out of this extraordinary family saga of personal and political conflict, Hugo was to fashion his own private myths, with himself as the singular embodiment of all the contradictory elements of the age. Hence his cultivation of antithesis, in and out of season. Deeply attached to his mother, he was reconciled with General Hugo (and ever more responsive to the Napoleonic legend) after her death.

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Hugo, studious and "pure," who at long last married his childhood sweetheart, suffered a severe blow when he discovered that his best friend, the poet and critic Sainte-Beuve, had become his wife's lover. After that, the scene changed radically. Caught *flagrante delicto* with Mme. Léonie Biard, Hugo escaped punishment while Mme. Biard went to prison for adultery. His love affair with the beautiful, long-suffering actress Juliette Drouet, who positively worshiped him, lasted for many years, until her death not long before his own. He kept her mostly as a sort of back street mistress and deceived her with countless actresses, courtesans, maidservants, and indeed almost any woman who came within his purview. Each token of his sexual prowess as a satyr was carefully recorded in his remarkable diaries, up to his final illness in his eighties.

After Voltaire, Hugo readily assumed the mantle of the fighter against injustice. There was scarcely a cause he did not take up, especially anything to do with capital punishment. He had long opposed it, ever since as a boy he had witnessed atrocities committed by Napoleon's invading armies in Spain—those summary executions imprinted on the mind's eye by Goya. Then there was the execution of his mother's lover, Lahorie, his godfather whom he mythologized. Thus Hugo sought to prevent the hanging of the abolitionist John Brown, and called in vain on Juárez not to execute the Emperor Maximilian. He intervened on behalf of Fenians, persecuted Jews, oppressed Poles, and he was the only French writer of repute to speak out on behalf of the defeated Communards during the terrible repression of 1871. He supported the cause of the advancement of women and the rights of children. He urged the formation of a United States of Europe (naturally under the aegis of France)—and it was this that finally convinced one of his contemporaries that Hugo was mad.

Hugo's projection of himself as the voice and, above all, the conscience of his era required at times a certain sleight of hand. To this could be added barefaced forgetfulness of the facts, the sweeping of uncomfortable matters under the carpet, and juggling with dates here and there. "My life is yours, your life is mine," wrote Olympio in the preface to his collection of poems, *Les Contemplations*, "when I speak to you about me, I am speaking to you about you." Many—not only in France and notwithstanding changing literary and artistic modes and tastes—felt then the hypnotic power of that "sonorous echo." Many continue to feel it, whether reluctantly or with gratitude, as well as something approaching awe.

Along with many of his generation, Hugo was obsessed with history, and he believed in the mystical power of imaginative literature to interpret it. In Hugo's view, "we enter even more profoundly into the soul of peoples and into the inner history of human societies through literary life rather than political life." Speaking of "the historical aspect and the legendary aspect" of his work, Hugo also proclaimed, in the preface to his series of poems *La Légende des siècles*, that the legendary element "is not less true" than the historical element. Such an attitude requires a strong sense of the mythical and mystical forces at work in human fate, the great Hugolian theme. Hence his endless struggle with the unanswered and unanswerable questions.

Always full of curiosity, he was a great witness and voyeur as well as a great visionary, hastening to see what was going on in the streets. Deeply distressed by the poverty and hardship he saw about him, he responded with generous compassion for the suffering underdog, with hatred of injustice and oppression. He has been criticized for paying little heed to the economic factors that Karl Marx (some sixteen years his junior) would declare to be the "scientific" explanation for the development of social structures. Instead, there is in Hugo a constant debate with conscience, something passionately human and humane, more elemental and more readily grasped by educated and uneducated alike. There is the stress on myth and mystery conveyed

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through resonant images with a hypnotic Wagnerian potency. Once those poetic images have taken possession of the imagination, it is difficult to dislodge them. Who can ever forget such visions as the dreadful black sun or the eye that inexorably follows the fratricide Cain wherever he goes? If it would be rash to overlook the power of myth in Marx's system, with Hugo's mythological stance as with Wagner's it is the solar plexus rather than the intellect that is affected.

Hugo's sense of a totality that arose out of his own literary and political diversity could certainly prove convenient. As an ambitious young poet under the Bourbon Restoration, he inevitably wrote poetry that was Catholic, monarchist, anti-Bonapartist. In those days, he called the French Revolution of 1789 "the saturnalia of atheism and anarchy." Bonaparte was then qualified as scourge, despot, and false god. As a marker of literary revolution, his extravagant verse drama *Hernani* would become associated (with some help on Hugo's part) with the revolution of July 1830, which took place a few months after the play's famous, tempestuous first night. All the same, the Romantic literary revolutionary enjoyed the confidence of King Louis-Philippe and was elevated to the peerage. This did not prevent Hugo from becoming increasingly Bonapartist, singing the grandeur of Napoleon and urging the return of the Emperor's ashes, much to the distaste of his fellow poet Alphonse de Lamartine, future ruling spirit of the provisional government that issued from the revolution of February 1848.

Declining Lamartine's offer of the ministry of education, Hugo joined the republicans in 1849 as a *député*. Later he would move further to the Left, and he would unblushingly claim to have been a socialist since 1828—"old socialist that I am." This happened after the coup d'état of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte on December 2, 1851. Hugo—distressed by the casualties, sympathetic as always to the defeated, and feeling that the new dictator had personally deceived him—became the mighty voice of exile and protest. He thundered anathema from Jersey and then Guernsey against the great Emperor's nephew, "Napoleon the Little," whose advent he had done so much to promote. After nineteen years in vocal exile, he returned to France with the establishment of the Third Republic, serving as senator and thorn in the side of his fellow republicans. Amid grieving crowds, his body was carried on a pauper's hearse (according to his wishes—a final theatrical touch) from the Arc de Triomphe to its burial place in the Panthéon. The nationalist writer Maurice Barrès used Hugo's funeral for the denouement of his once influential novel *Les Déracinés* (1897), portraying the poet-prophet as the hero of the French nation and source of its spiritual regeneration.

So many changes, so many veerings, so much wavering between "yes" and "no," "pro" and "contra," so much careful weighing of opposites while insisting upon a fundamental unity—these are not gifts to the biographer. Avoiding prurience and debunking, those notorious pitfalls of modern biography, Graham Robb has mastered a vast mass of conflicting material. He has written with detachment, wit, and a fondness for aphorism what is certainly the best and most stylish literary biography of Victor Hugo in English.[1] Robb tellingly suggests that there were times when Hugo was not as radical as he liked to appear. Moreover, he is assiduous in pointing out details of Hugo's manipulation of his own record, though perhaps Olympio as a literary self-creator is not unique and leads in direct line to that celebrated twentieth-century mythomaniac André Malraux, who admired him so much.

However, Graham Robb does not appear to warm to French Romantic poetry, its "modernity," its theatricality, its wilder and more extravagantly emotional elements. ("Romantic" is one of those challenged all-

1 *Victor Hugo: A Biography*, by Graham Robb; Norton, 682 pages, $39.95.

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purpose words that are out of critical favor at the moment, but its use can surely be justified by the fact that nineteenth-century writers employed it themselves). Here were to be found the very qualities that struck not only Hugo's young contemporaries but later writers like André Gide as immensely daring and innovative. For instance, Gide —who famously opined that Hugo was France's greatest poet "alas"—used to read *Les Orientales* (poems he already knew by heart) before going to sleep. Gide was then, in 1929, nearly sixty years old. A certain lack of sympathy with French Romanticism at its extreme on the part of the biographer prompts an offhand tone on occasion. He is rather scathing about the much-admired musical effects in the poem "Les Djinns" in *Les Orientales*, for instance. And the actress Mlle. Mars, no longer young, who objected to some of her more bizarre lines as the heroine of *Hernani*, is called unkindly the "old war-horse of classical drama."

A more serious consequence is the omission of one of the major clues to the poet's stance. Essential to the young Victor Hugo's poetic role was the idea of the poet as a priest and a prophet. This concept was far from new: it could be traced back at least to Pindar and ancient Greece. But Hugo in his youth rejected the classical canon that had been used as a political instrument under Napoleon. Instead, Hugo insisted on claiming the legacy not of the ancient Greeks but of the Hebrew prophets Moses and Isaiah. In *Le Sacre de l'écrivain 1750 à 1830*, a penetrating study of the secular-cum-spiritual consecration of the writer during the rise of Romanticism in France, the late Paul Bénichou showed how Hugo's sense of poetic mission could be found even in his juvenilia. This means that Hugo did not, *pace* Graham Robb, begin to think of himself as a messiah and a prophet in the 1830s. It was Hugo's consecrated role from the beginning, and he never departed from it. Olympio would be photographed in exile "listening to God." The poet was "the favorite interviewer of God," as Sartre was to observe. Toward the end of his life, Hugo could remark excitedly to a Russian woman poet, "I shall see God. See God! Speak to Him! . . . What shall I say to Him?" (He was clearly untroubled by what the Almighty might have to say to him.) The poet's vatic stance sometimes led to a certain amount of obfuscatory nonsense. Hugo knew of his reputation for being stupid. Baudelaire, who like almost every younger nineteenth-century French writer felt ambivalent toward Hugo, both deeply indebted to him and anxious to break free, once saw him as proof that one could be a fool as well as a great man. Gide, however, would express the view that Hugo was by no means as stupid as he might appear. Maybe, as Graham Robb proposes, it would have been better if the poet had not attempted to extract a consistent philosophy from his inner divisions, but then he would not have been Hugo the nineteenth-century prophet with a direct line to the Almighty.

The fact is that messiahs of every sort were common enough in Paris in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, all bent on a quest for the religion of the future. Here were followers of "Gracchus" Babeuf and Filippo Buonarroti, Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and the rest. As the satirist Henri Monnier expressed it in 1842, "Never in any age did humanity have as many saviours as at present. Wherever you walk, you step on a messiah. Each one has his religion in his pocket and as regards formulae of perfect happiness you are faced only with embarrassment of choice." He was speaking less of sacerdotal poets like Hugo than of utopian socialists, Communists, mystical political seers, and prophets of various colors, all dreaming of a post-Christian religion, a new man and a new redeemed world. At about twenty-five, Karl Marx, who was living in Paris in 1843–4, did not escape this heady ambience, in which he formulated the central role of the class struggle. (It is claimed that he first mentioned the class struggle toward the end of 1843.) He even said later that he had dis-

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covered it through his reading of "bourgeois" historians of the French Revolution like François Mignet, Adolphe Thiers, and Augustin Thierry. Without adducing any documentary evidence, Marx would declare that he had "proved" how the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is only the transition to a classless society. At the time, the class struggle—which has remained a shibboleth of the Left in France (and elsewhere) to this day—was just one more philosophical theory among many.

Equally important in those days, perhaps more so, was the desire for reconciliation. Marx, whose powers of sarcasm were impressive, castigated Lamartine in *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850* for his devotion to reconciliation between classes and his failure to appreciate what Marx considered to be the essential nature of the class struggle as an interpretive tool and as a revolutionary instrument. He also took Hugo to task in the second (1869) preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* because, he said, unlike himself the poet made Napoleon III as an individual look great rather than little. "I on the contrary," declared Marx with no little self-satisfaction, "demonstrate how the *class struggle* in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part." It was in 1839 that Hugo spoke of giving precedence to social questions over political questions, four years after Lamartine found social problems to be urgently in need of solution. Poverty must be destroyed, thought Hugo, though how this was to be accomplished was unclear. Like Lamartine, Hugo belonged with those who desired harmony between the different sections of society, and who took seriously the third item of the revolutionary trinity, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Numerous were those who advocated fraternity before the failure of the Revolution of 1848. Apparently, Hugo did not much care for the idea of classes: he spoke of the "so-called" middle class, the "so-called" lower class. In short, he always declined to ascribe to class, that elusive quantity, any real significance.

Nonetheless, it was toward the end of the Revolution of 1848 that Hugo underwent a severe crisis of conscience. This was during the suppression of the desperate popular uprising of the June Days. He had been returned to the Constituent Assembly in the elections of June 1848, and he was appointed one of the sixty special commissioners whose task it was to establish order during the insurrection. Recklessly defying danger under fire, he encouraged soldiers of the National Guard to take possession of a section of the barricades. There were many casualties. Moreover, due to him, arrests were made that led to people being imprisoned or banished to the colonies, a fate known as the "dry guillotine" since it all too often ended in death. His role in the affair continued to haunt him and disposed him gradually to alter his attitude to the theme of revolution.

The notion that there can be something romantic and exhilarating about revolution is not one that normally looms large. In 1832, at the time of the failed uprising in the cloître of Saint-Merri, Hugo had qualified it as "acts of folly drowned in blood." Now in *Les Misérables* (1862), that mighty work, digressions and all, he placed firmly on the literary map the heroic myth of the unsuccessful revolution in his portrayal of the very same insurrection. Here, the pistol-waving youth of Delacroix's painting *Liberty Guiding the People* turns into Gavroche, the marvelously brave urchin of the Paris streets and barricades, whose heroic death has caused many a tear to be shed. Years later, Simone de Beauvoir was still projecting the heroic romantic revolutionary failure of 1832 in an episode of her oppressive existentialist novel *Tous les Hommes sont mortels* (1946). Why the romance of the unsuccessful revolution? It is because in all likelihood the successful revolution will end sooner or later in disillusion for the utopian idealist, whereas the abortive revolution, with the noble supreme self-sacrifice of its par-

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ticipants, retains the sublime hope of an ideal to be fulfilled in the future.

In his *Antimémoires*, André Malraux, who owed something of his dazzling but often obscure romantic revolutionary rhetoric to Victor Hugo's, declared that he had seen copies of *Les Misérables* along with the anarchist works of Bakunin on the Ramblas in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. For the former Byronic icon of the Left and (by then) Gaullist and nationalist Malraux, "the lesson of the French Revolution, the exaltation of the fight for justice proclaimed from Saint-Just to Jaurès, by way of Victor Hugo, preserves a prestige at least equal to that of Marxism." According to Malraux, writing in 1967, the French revolutionary tradition that included Hugo coexisted with Russian revolutionary technique in Latin America and Africa. Malraux's juxtaposition of Hugo's revolutionary influence with that of Marx, oddly far-fetched as it may well seem at first glance, is immensely suggestive. Malraux was not speaking of analysis but of revolutionary fervor and "exaltation" as found in Hugo, a kind of emotional rapture, in a context of grandeur and sublimity that in his eyes embraced Saint-Just, the ruthless young "Angel of the Terror." Melvin Lasky, editor of the now sadly defunct literary and political journal *Encounter*, once told me that he had seen *Les Misérables* on the bookshelves of dissident Ethiopian colonels who ultimately engineered the regime of Mengistu, the Marxist-Leninist dictator. One may hazard a guess that more people have read *Les Misérables* to the end, and have been held and deeply moved by it, than have finished *Das Kapital*.

Who can assess the influence of Hugo? It is both literary and political, and vast as the ocean with which Hugo used to commune on Guernsey. A certain young Georgian seminarist named Dzhugashvili was punished by his superiors on being found in possession of Hugo's forbidden novel, *Quatrevingt-treize* (1873), set in the Vendée in 1793 during the revolutionary Terror. Doubtless it did not require Hugo's single-minded fanatic Cimourdain to turn Dzhugashvili into Stalin, but it could have helped, along with the words of the young idealist, Gauvain. "What the revolution does at this moment is mysterious," says Gauvain. "Behind the visible work there is invisible work. . . . The visible work is savage, the invisible work is sublime. . . . It is strange and beautiful. . . . Beneath a scaffolding of barbarism a temple of civilization is being built." In effect, this temple is constructed out of blood sacrifice and self-sacrifice.

The notion that something good, progressive, and sublime can come forth from chaos, barbarism, and evil is central to Hugo's way of thinking. "It is through evil that we must issue from evil," he once wrote in a poem. It is but a short step from here to the idea that the horror is "necessary" in order to produce the sublimity. Hugo had taken this step very early, in 1828, in *Odes*: "A chaos is necessary for one who desires to make a world." A few years later, in 1832, in *Les Chants du crépuscule*, he inquired of the Lord whether lightning and thunder were not necessary to produce "the pearl formed by the seas." In *Quatrevingt-treize* Cimourdain asks Gauvain, whom he is about to have guillotined, "So you absolve the present moment?" Gauvain replies, "Yes." "Why?" queries Cimourdain. "Because it is a storm," says Gauvain. "A storm always knows what it is doing. As against one blasted oak numberless forests are purified. Civilization was in the grip of plague, this gale comes to the rescue. . . . Faced with the horrendous infection, I understand the fury of the blast." Curious image, and even more curious logic, this personification of the wise and knowledgeable storm. Many have accepted it, and with it—after Gauvain—their own elimination for the sake of the utopian religion of the future.

Lest it be thought that the idea of the necessary storm of revolution perished with the Soviet regime, here is the Chinese dissident, Harry Wu, sustained throughout his long imprisonment in the Laogai by Hugo's potently humane work, *Les Misérables*. He

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was punished for concealing his copy of this "bourgeois" novel, had his arm broken, and saw the book publicly burned. "As Hugo pointed out," related Harry Wu afterward in 1996, "the storm of revolution could be necessary and even unavoidable truly to reform a society. Filth could hardly be cleansed thoroughly without such a storm." Through *Les Misérables*, the message of concern for humanity could lastingly coexist in the courageous idealist with the view of the necessary revolutionary storm.

Graham Robb speaks of "the dangerous aspect" of *Les Misérables*, but he confines it to the fact that guilt is shown to lie with society and that the reform of institutions comes before punishment. Much earlier, and for a different reason, Lamartine had declared that "this book is dangerous." This was because, in his view, "The most murderous and most terrible of the passions to give to the masses is the passion for the impossible." Hugo, somewhat disconcerted, called Lamartine's criticism "the bite of a swan." There was a certain irony in Lamartine's comment, for he himself had helped to glamorize the Terror in his history of the Girondins. By now, though, chastened after his bitter political failure, Lamartine saw politics as the art of the possible. That was far too dull and commonplace for Hugo. For him, there had necessarily to be high drama, catastrophe, thunder and lightning on high, and horrible darkness and destruction here below before the bright pure new day could dawn. It is the paradox of the impatient humanitarian.

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Two poems *by Elizabeth Spires*

Dogwood

Whiter than paper, whiter than snow,
whiter than the moon in its fullness,
whiter than clouds passing over,

I close my eyes and see white stars
hanging in the air of the backyard.
For weeks they are out there.

Whiter than music, whiter than bone,
whiter than ivory, whiter than hope,
whiter than prayer, whiter than a name,

Whitest of all white things in the world,
I want to know what you know.

Whiter than silence, whiter than thought,
whiter than interruption, whiter than frost,
whiter than the body's hollows,

Now, after too many white words,
I stumble and touch branches heavy
with ten thousand blurred white petals.

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Whiter than love or death,
whiter than my winter breath,
whiter than a white room's emptiness,

As if I could count them all, one
for each man, woman, and child.

Whiter than the blank white sky,
whiter than the white of an eye,
whiter than foam on the breaking black wave—

For weeks you have stood there,
arms raised like a priest
in silent ceremony, praising creation

in the only way you know, now
tell me why we have to die.

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Above the pagoda

In my next life, I will live in a house
with a roof that curls like a smile.
Outside, a script of trees and clouds.
Paths winding up the mountain.
Pilgrims climbing the ninety-nine steps
to the pagoda, carrying bright offerings.
Shivering, I will rise in the morning,
blow on my hands like coals,
and squat to make tea in the teapot.
Slowly, the leaves will fill my heart
like a cup, the tea leaves swirling,
knowing more than I know.
In the room's far corner, an altar.
A few flowers, incense.
Buddha smiling.

How little will be necessary!
Like a beggar's bowl,
each day will be full and empty.
The white cherry dropping its petals.
A snail on a silent journey,
leaving a shining path.
The swollen moon floating in a pool,
disappearing, coming back.
A tipsy bee on the lip of the wine cup.
The sake overturned. Joy. Tears.
One life containing everything.

All will be a great wheel turning,
the seasons a pageant where
the low and the highborn parade

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in rags and brilliant finery.
Such thoughts!
The years will pass.
My hair will fade to no color.
My face will be an old apple,
my eyes thin moons when I smile.
Bent like a walking stick,
what will I think of then?
The past, captured and fixed forever?
The future, glimmering on the horizon?
In that far moment, will it seem
this life is no different from that one?

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London journal

The emperor of ice cream

by John Gross

Britain over the past year or so, ever since Labor was returned to power in May 1997, has presented a strange spectacle: we have had a government encouraging a people to declare war on its own culture. The campaign has taken many forms, but it is best (or most brutally) summed up in the frequent calls from high places for the "rebranding" of Britain: supermarket language applied to a whole society. Not that this transformation is meant to be part of a broader social revolution—not at least as old-fashioned socialists would have understood such a thing. It has largely been invoked as an end in itself.

When Tony Blair won the election, he was committed (not in so many words, of course) to the fundamental economic doctrines of Margaret Thatcher. There was to be no return to nationalization or the ways of Old Labor, no resurgence of trade-union power, no major redistribution of wealth. Many people doubted Blair's sincerity, others wondered whether he wouldn't have to start making concessions to the Left once the election was over. But assuming his economic policies proved to be what he said they were, it seemed a fair bet that the radical impulses of a Blair regime would burn all the more brightly elsewhere. Left-wing social and cultural policies would compensate for right-wing economics.

In the event, Blair has proved as good as his word: the market economy reigns unchallenged. At the same time, the air is thick with official talk of "modernizing" and "modernization." The government continually lays claim, not without reason, to being an engine of change.

Its most drastic or potentially drastic reforms so far have been constitutional—Scottish devolution (which, if the opinion polls are any guide, looks like a halfway house to full independence); milder moves in the same direction in Wales; the first steps toward a system of proportional representation; a downgrading of the importance of Parliament, and a corresponding increase in the prime minister's quasi-presidential powers. All these developments, though primarily political, are bound to have far-reaching cultural consequences. (On present showing, Britain is going to end up being not so much rebranded as deconstructed.) But cultural questions in the most direct sense have also turned out, as foreseen, to loom large on the Blairite agenda.

The form which they have taken, however, would have been hard to predict. For a start, the Blair government has been sending out complicated signals in the cultural field where it has the most obvious power to intervene—education. The balance-sheet of its educational policies defies easy summary, and what these policies will mean in practice is still very uncertain. But in principle it is at least as committed to the defense (or restoration) of traditional values as its Conservative predecessors.

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It isn't from Blair's education ministers, in fact, that you will hear talk of rebranding. The supposed cultural revolution has focused instead on the arts, on entertainment, and (for want of a better word) on lifestyles; and here the results have been more tawdry than anyone—or anyone not privy to New Labor's innermost thoughts—could have dreamed.

Not long after the election, Tony Blair gave a reception at 10 Downing Street for representatives of the brave new Britain with which he was eager to be identified. If there were any artists, scientists, or scholars present, they were lost in the crowd. The tone was set by entertainers and television personalities, and the undoubted star of the proceedings was Noel Gallagher, one of the two predominant members, along with his brother, of the ultra-popular pop group Oasis. Even in the world of pop, the Gallaghers stand out by reason of their crass behavior, but that didn't prevent the prime minister from gazing at Noel with rapt adoration in a picture which appeared in virtually all the papers the following day. And we were soon to learn (if we hadn't guessed as much already) that under the Blair regime, with its spin-doctors and carefully managed publicity, such pictures don't become available by accident.

Blair had already indicated the importance he attached to cultural matters by scrapping the old Heritage Department (a name which, admittedly, nobody missed) and replacing it with a full-blown Ministry of Culture. As though this weren't enough, he had also appointed a cultural "task force" to assist the new minister and generally help foster the arts—or rather, in a phrase which we were to hear more of, the country's "creative industries." The chairman was Richard Branson, the bearded balloonist and entrepreneur (Virgin Airways, etc.) who regularly tops the polls when young people in Britain are asked to name the figure in public life they most admire. Literature was represented by a publisher with a firmly commercial reputation, who also happens to be the wife of one of Blair's political aides; the visual arts were represented by a fashion designer, music by—the manager of Oasis. And as though to show that there had been no mistake, at the second reception Blair gave in Downing Street, not long after the first, Noel Gallagher again had a starring role.

It was amusing to speculate, the first time round, who would have been Gallagher's equivalent if the Labor government of Clement Attlee had given a similar soiree after its victory in 1945. Vaughan Williams, perhaps (though Attlee certainly wouldn't have groveled to him in the way Tony groveled to Noel). By the time of the second reception, however, the joke had worn off. It was clear by then that the new government really was committed to a ruthless populism (a vote-garnering populism, though one which also seemed to come from the heart); that its spin-doctors were masters of the language of false urgency ("task forces," "mission statements," keeping followers "on message"); that it felt at home, not merely with the market economy, but with the brashest aspects of that economy; that it was never happier than when aligning itself with soap-opera stars and the tabloid press.

The most notorious slogan that has been used in the modernizing campaign is "Cool Britannia." Its implications are too obvious to call for comment, though it is worth pointing out—as an indication of the forces that have shaped New Labor's thinking—that the phrase itself is neither particularly new, nor particularly British: it was first used by a 1960s pop group, the Bonzo Dog Doodah Band, sporadically revived by journalists, and given wider currency in 1996 when it was adopted as the name of a brand of ice cream distributed in Britain by the American firm of Ben and Jerry's.

Yet such is the image in which the country is being asked to recast itself. "Coolness" is meant to be the most distinctive quality, for example, of Panel 2000, the committee set up by the government this April in order to make it easier for Britain to present "a positive contemporary identity"

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to the world. And if you wonder exactly what coolness is, it is embodied in such committee members as the twenty-six-year-old fashion designer Stella McCartney (daughter of Sir Paul); or Nightshade, one of the lycra-clad stars of the television program *Gladiators* (which is what it sounds like); or Lord Levy, the millionaire Labor fund-raiser who was elevated to the peerage shortly after the election (and who first made his mark managing a singer called Alvin Stardust).

Under another government, Panel 2000 might have been a simple scheme for promoting the sale of British goods abroad. What is striking about New Labor (something which comes out even more clearly in the video which accompanied the launch of the panel) is the way in which it insists on elevating the commercial to the ideological. It is a new order which is being peddled, with Tony Blair at the heart of it—the Emperor of Ice Cream.

"Cool Britannia" has recently attracted ridicule from the kind of critics to whom Blair pays attention (the comedian and popular playwright Ben Elton, for instance). He has even made a passing attempt to dissociate himself from the phrase, and if the whole stunt became too much of an embarrassment his government would naturally let it fade away. But there will be other stunts, and, in any case, the Blairizing of Britain doesn't depend on a single campaign, but on a war of attrition. Almost every day brings news—sometimes from the government itself, sometimes from one of its allies—of a tradition under threat or stripped away, or of an exercise in empty modernization, or of another bright populist gesture.

The Secretary for Wales announces that he wants to replace the ancient symbol of the red dragon on the Welsh flag; a ministerial colleague chimes in and affirms that modern Wales is "about" Manic Street Preachers and Catatonia (well-known local pop groups). The chairman of British Air does away with the company's logo, which was based on the Union Jack, and replaces it with a hodgepodge of "colorful" designs supposedly inspired by the parts of the world over which individual air-routes pass. (He is duly rewarded with membership of Panel 2000.) Tony Blair intervenes in the case of Deirdre Rachid, a soap-opera character who has been wrongfully imprisoned (in the soap opera, that is, not in real life). The government discovers the joys of lower case, and follows up a trade exhibition called "powerhouse::uk" with a pamphlet entitled *modernizing britain*. . . .

Some of these matters are no doubt trivial in themselves—as trivial, say, as Blair's habit of appearing in public in denim shirts and jeans; as trivial as the decision to entertain a visiting head of state in one of Terence Conran's restaurants rather than in official quarters. But the atmosphere is made up of particles.

Blair's appeal to the electorate can't be fully understood unless it is recognized that, however inconsistently, he has his conservative side. There are times, indeed, when he can seem curiously old-fashioned. He has let it be known more than once, for instance, that his favorite novel is *Ivanhoe*—which may leave you wondering what other novels he has read, but which at least suggests that he wouldn't wish to be thought of as an enemy of high culture.

Yet his regime has already done a good deal to debase the cultural currency, not only by celebrating so much that is cheap, but through a willful blurring of distinctions. The Minister of Culture, Chris Smith, said it all when he recently affirmed that "Bob Dylan is as valid as Keats." "Valid" may be a weasel word—green is as valid as blue, Kentucky Fried Chicken is as valid as caviar—but the message was clear, especially in a world where Bob Dylan isn't exactly neglected and Keats isn't being positively rammed down people's throats. And what Chris Smith proclaimed (he might have been stilling an uneasy conscience—he once wrote a thesis on Wordsworth and Coleridge), others have simply taken for granted. The Spice Girls may be one of the

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more likable British pop groups, and the Royal Shakespeare Company may not be all that it should be, but it is still disconcerting to find a Foreign Office minister speaking about them in the same breath as examples of artistic groups which ought to be invited to the British embassy when they are touring America, in order to "make a splash for Britain."

It is in this context that anxieties have been stirred up by the appointment as head of the Arts Council of Gerry Robinson, a tycoon with no previous public connection with the arts (unless you count the fact that the empire he runs includes a television company). The council is far and away the most important source of state funding for the arts; its administration is in a mess, and Robinson may well be the right man to sort it out. But there is also a strong suspicion, partly based on the fact that he is a keen government supporter, that he is liable to shift resources away from the "elite" arts toward the cinema, pop music, and even fashion design.

A similar whiff of anti-elitism hangs over the appointment of the head of a large recording company as chairman of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. (His best-known cultural pronouncement before his appointment was made public was that the Spice Girls—there are five of them—are "sex on ten legs.") Perhaps the suspicion is unjustified: his main task is to bring order to the Opera House's troubled finances. But there can be no doubt that anti-elitism is in the air, with little or nothing from the government to discourage it, and that the opera is one of its main targets. A British bank recently withdrew a major subsidy from Covent Garden and announced that it was going to spend the money supporting an annual pop festival instead. To them that have shall be given.

The failure of the government to come through with more money has already caused widespread resentment in the upper reaches of the theater, where before the election Blair enjoyed almost universal support—though for the moment the main form it has taken is redoubled denunciation of Margaret Thatcher. (Old habits die hard.) Meanwhile, by a paradox which might have been foreseen, the most strident criticisms of New Labor are coming from the pop world which it has done so much to cultivate. The most celebrated British pop paper, the *New Musical Express*, has devoted a special issue to making clear its disaffection ("The Stars Kick Blair's Arse"), and one of the most unforgettable images of the year so far has been the rage of the deputy prime minister, John Prescott, after having a jug of ice water thrown over him at the "Britpop" music awards by Danbert Nobacon, a member of an anarchist band called Chumbawamba. (Nobacon—hence his name—is also a ferocious vegetarian.) My sympathies were entirely with Prescott, until I asked myself what he was doing at the Britpop ceremony in the first place.

To some extent New Labor has been able to placate its more radical supporters by continuing to snipe away at "privilege," "stuffiness," supposedly outmoded ceremonies, and so forth. Much of this has been purely symbolic, which doesn't mean that it doesn't often seem actuated by malice. With a hundred other locations available, for example, the government has chosen to quarter a small group of homeless people in Admiralty Arch, which can only have been chosen because it is a building closely identified with Britain's past greatness. (It is where the campaign against U-boats was masterminded in World War II, for instance.) Horse Guards Parade, best known for the Trooping of the Color and similar ceremonies, has recently been put in its place by the presence of four balloonlike, hamburger-shaped objects housing an exhibition—"powerhouse::uk"—of up-to-the-minute banality. (One of the balloons was devoted to the theme of "creative networking.")

For something beyond banality, however—inanity, perhaps—one must turn to the plans which have been announced for

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the famous £750 million Millenium Dome currently rising from the mud in Greenwich. Much of what is going to take place in the Dome remains a mystery, but we do know that it is going to be divided into twelve "zones" (working out at an average of $100 million apiece). The zone devoted to celebrating industrial resourcefulness and ingenuity is going to be called—with an unaccountable bow to James Bond—"Licensed to Skill." The zone called "Spirit Level" will offer a New Age-ish setting for "a moment of peace and reflection": somewhere to pause as you make your way from "Serious Play" to "The Body Zone" (which is going to house a 170-foot sculpture of a human being of indeterminate sex). Although the general flavor of the exhibition is going to be international, one zone—"UK Now"—is being specifically set aside to reflect British national identity. It is being designed by a Frenchman.

Many people are confidently predicting that the "Millennium Experience," as the man in charge, Peter Mandelson, prefers to call it, is going to be a flop. I am not convinced. A failure in comparison with the Great Exhibition of 1851, or the other great expositions and world's fairs of the past, almost certainly. A failure in terms of intelligence and inspiration, undoubtedly. But that doesn't necessarily mean that it won't attract the desired number of visitors, or that most of them won't feel more or less satisfied. Early this year Mandelson paid a short visit to Disney World, to see what he could learn from it, and came back singing its praises. Some of his critics were scornful, others dismayed: the *Daily Telegraph* commented that it looked as though Britain was going to end up celebrating the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Christ under the sign of Mickey Mouse. But, from his own point of view, Mandelson probably knew what he was doing. At a sub-Disney level, the show may well scrape home.

If it does, it will point up the most unnerving fact about Tony Blair, which is that so far, at least, he knows how to please most of the people most of the time. Over a year after he took office, the sun continues to shine for him in the opinion polls: he enjoys a favorable rating unmatched by any previous prime minister. And since his popularity is primarily based on image, on the general confidence he inspires, it seems fair to assume that his cultural policies are playing well. At the very least, they can't be doing him much harm.

A sobering thought. But then Blair himself is very much a product of his time, a child of the Sixties and Seventies made over—up to a point—in the Eighties. The cultural forces he represents have been building up for a generation. What is new, however, and what shouldn't be underestimated, is that he has armed these forces with governmental powers. As prime minister, he could do a good deal to protect and preserve grown-up standards. Instead, he is using his influence to ensure that they are eroded even further.

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Theater

Oscar nominations

by Mark Steyn

About halfway through the second act of *The Judas Kiss*, Oscar Wilde observes that he has put his genius into his life but only his talent into his work. It's the sort of glib throwaway a clever man might toss to a talk-show host or magazine interviewer. But he would be astonished to be held to it a century later. In 1998, there are no revivals of *Lady Windermere's Fan* or *The Importance of Being Earnest*, no films of *Salomé* or *An Ideal Husband*. Yet Oscar Wilde is more famous than ever: barely a week passes without a new play or film or book about Oscar the celebrity, Oscar the "gay" "Irish" martyr.

On reflection, make that "gay" "Irish" "martyr."

To be sure, we are not the only generation to let our fascination with his life obliterate his art. The first, fatal eclipse began in 1895: the opening night of his most successful play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People," was also the night that the Marquess of Queensberry left a note at the playwright's club inscribed "For Oscar Wilde posing as a Somdomite [*sic*]." Thereafter, as every play, film, scholarly treatise, and gay activist is only too happy to tell us, Wilde's career was destroyed by a morally hypocritical society's obsession with his sexuality. Er, pardon me for asking, but isn't history repeating itself? The tragedy of the 1890s is reduced to farce in the 1990s: instead of celebrating *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the world prefers to trumpet *The Importance of Being Oscar*, A Serious Tragedy for Trivial People. Wilde died bankrupt in 1900. Had he lived to the same age as George Bernard Shaw, who was two years younger, he would have died in 1948, and his work, under British and Commonwealth law, would still be in copyright. On the evidence of Broadway's current interest in it, it's a reasonable assumption to figure he'd still be broke.

So instead we have Stephen Fry in the film *Wilde*, Moisés Kaufman's off-Broadway *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, and such recent London plays as Thomas Kilroy's *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*, and Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar*. Into this crowded field comes *The Judas Kiss* (from London's Almeida Theatre, now on Broadway at the Broadhurst). It's rather flatly staged by Richard Eyre and written by, of all people, David Hare. This is the first time Hare has chosen to dramatize a historical figure, and you can't help wondering what on earth poor Oscar did to deserve this latest cruel jest of fate. Wilde may have been a preening aesthete who was wont to stroll down Piccadilly with a lily in his hand (as Gilbert and Sullivan put it) and the sort of fellow who told U.S. Customs he had nothing to declare but his genius, but, underneath all the flouncing vanity, the principal characteristic of both his life and work is his generosity of spirit—not a quality (to

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put it at its very mildest) which has ever commended itself to Hare. Although Hare, like most leftish writers of his generation, professes incessantly to have the masses' interests at heart, his vanity makes poor old Wilde look like a piker. In the dark days of Major's Britain, he wrote a column for *The Guardian* bemoaning the country's descent into a vulgar, consumerist philistinism. As evidence of this, he described in detail how he'd been at some frightful party and found himself talking to a ghastly businessman who, after the introductions, asked, "And what do you do?" Tory Britain was now in such a state of decay that there were people out there who hadn't a clue who David Hare was! Horror of horrors! If only Oscar were still around to do justice to this latter-day Lady Bracknell. Alas, instead of an Oscar Wilde play about David Hare, we must make do with a David Hare play about Oscar Wilde.

According to Hare, the subject of *The Judas Kiss* is "not Wilde, but love; not Bosie, but betrayal." That's a lot of "buts," even before the nude scenes. However, for Hare, it's a standard approach: *Skylight*, the last work of his to be seen in New York, was nominally about a man and a woman, but, as the man was a Thatcherite plutocrat and the woman a penniless socialist, it was a romance between two classes. From *Skylight*'s poky rented flat, Hare has now moved on to the plusher quarters of Victorian London: from attic love down to Attic love. The formula, though, is much the same: *The Judas Kiss* sets out to chart the relationship not of two famous people, but of two famous themes. Act One is mostly about love, Act Two about betrayal, both focused on two periods of this most publicly anatomized life about which little is known. In Act One, it's April 5, 1895, and Wilde is holed up at the Cadogan, as his first gay lover Robbie Ross and his current amour Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas ponder the collapse of his case against Queensberry. In Act Two, it's 1897: a disgraced Wilde is out of gaol and reunited with his beloved Bosie in a penurious Neapolitan exile. In Act One, all seem to be taking their cue from Oscar and conducting themselves as if actors in a Wilde comedy; in Act Two, the masks have slipped and a cranky, bitchy fatigue is all that remains. In both acts, there are trains to be caught: in Act One, Wilde is being urged to flee to France; in Act Two, Bosie has an eye on reconciliation with his generous mummy and is packing for the night service back to London. Both acts climax with a kiss. In Act One, Bob Crawley's set is all suffocating opulence: the bed, the walls, the ceiling are weighed down with swags and ruches of fabric. In Act Two, it's a bleached, minimalist set, drained of props, save for Oscar's chair and a single bed: this is supposedly the Italian coast, though, after the Cadogan, it seems more like an Earl's Court bedsit after the bailiffs have cleaned it out. The issues that were hedged and festering in the constraints of London can now be aired in the open. Both acts begin with sex: in Act One, it's heterosexual—a naked waiter performs vigorous full-frontal cunnilingus on an amply endowed chambermaid spreadeagled against the wall in Christ-like pose and howling her pleasure; in Act Two, it's gay—Bosie is entwined on the bed with a muscular-buttocked bit of rough trade from the docks.

In any other Hare play, this structural patness would pass. But because he's writing about another playwright—a *great* playwright—it seems lumberingly crass. Wilde is like Fred Astaire: you work hard to make it look easy, lighter than air. *The Importance* is one of the most brilliantly structured plays in the English language—extending and inverting all kinds of conventions from farce and melodrama—but you're not aware of structure when you watch it. By contrast, Hare uses structure to make his work look hard, deep, weighty. In a sane world, we would be celebrating the pure comedic delight of Wilde's plays, rather than watching inferior writers filch his life for whatever grim points they want to make.

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Take, for example, the extravagant abandon of the opening cunnilingus: Hare has chosen to give the sharpest tongue in his play not to Wilde the celebrated aphorist but to Arthur the waiter. When Arthur (Alex Walkinshaw) and Phoebe the maid (Stina Neilsen) are disturbed *in flagrante* in the debris of Bosie's unmade bed, Phoebe flees to the bathroom by a circuitous route which ensures that even those in the restricted-view seats can get acquainted with her bouncing bosoms and luxuriant pudendum. As Mr. Moffatt, the senior butler, is expressing his disapproval, Arthur unwraps his robe and flashes his penis. Mr. Moffatt explains that Arthur will have to be "disciplined," not for the first time. "At what hour do you wish this act of discipline to take place?" smirks Arthur, making it clear that this is not the first time he has had to submit to Mr. Moffatt's iron rod and, indeed, that he is quite happy to do so. Thus begins an evening in which absolutely everyone but Oscar is getting tons of sex every which way, yet he's the only one getting persecuted for it. Victorian hypocrisy, Q.E.D.

The only problem with the 1990s view of Oscar—"a gay man who was crucified by morally hypocritical British society" (*In Theater* magazine)—is that, unfortunately for those in search of a gay poster boy, Wilde was a man who sued for the right to be a hypocrite. Queensberry honestly thought his son and his chum were "posing" as Somdomites—"playing silly buggers" just to wind him up. Many Britons of Wilde's background are what one might call socially homosexual: they don't have penetrative sex with other men, but they delight in pouting and queening and camping and mincing and limp-wristing their way round the room calling everyone "sweetie" and "darling." At Oxford, for example, there is a Piers Gaveston Society, named after King Edward II's boyfriend, whose members—including *soi-disant* heartthrob Hugh Grant—like to swan around in lipstick and fishnets. But, when the party's over, they slink furtively back to the shameful, closeted world of heterosexual domesticity. In other words, you can be "out" without necessarily being "in"—outwardly camp and outrageous, while quietly conventional in the peace of your home. In late Victorian London, this was all the rage. Far from being reviled by nineteenth-century society, they were celebrated. We are the ones so hung up on categorization that the subtle elasticity of "Victorian values" is now beyond our comprehension.

But, in that case, Wilde's perplexed supporters say, why did he feel obliged to sue Queensberry for his reputation? To which the answer is, why not? Under the libel laws of England, a plaintiff can sue for almost anything and win. I'd estimate that, as a columnist for London newspapers, I received on average fifteen menacing letters a year from m'learned friends whose celebrity clients are anxious to extract vast damages from me for mentioning things that, in fact, are true. Forty years ago, Liberace sued *The Daily Mirror* because its gossip columnist had had the temerity to use the word "fruity" in a piece about him: the implication of effeminancy and homosexuality was, he claimed, grossly damaging to his reputation. Needless to say, he won a bundle. (In 1985, the day after Liberace died, from AIDS, the *Mirror* wrote an editorial concluding with the request, "Can we have our money back?") If Liberace can win damages for being described as fruity, it's not unreasonable for Wilde to feel he was entitled to *something* for being hailed as a Somdomite. His decision to sue was, under the opportunities afforded by English libel law, entirely rational.

To his credit, Hare, unlike most of Wilde's gay cheerleaders, has given the matter some thought: his line is that the artifice of Wilde's persona was necessary to the artifice of his work, and that once control of his social identity passed out of his hands he was unable to write; Oscar Wilde lived on a few years, but "Oscar Wilde" was gone forever. The best part of Liam Neeson's reading of Wilde is that, in between the

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fringe-flopping, wrist-twirling this-one's-for-posterity posing, he gives us flashes of the jangled, shredded nerves striving to hold the glamorous dandy together: the act is beginning to disintegrate. According to Wilde, in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," "Each man kills the thing he loves"; the play tiptoes towards a modern-day heresy: the thing he loved killed the man. And so Hare struggles half-heartedly against the modern gay sensibility's determination to take Wilde on Queensberry's valuation, as a "Somdomite"—a typing error in more ways than one. Indeed, in both Hare's evasions and Neeson's big bruiser of a man, there's a kind of defensive heterosexuality. This Wilde is not the gay icon who has nothing to declare but his penis.

In place of homophobia, Hare claims to be offering an original thesis that repressive, colonial England is suddenly turning on an Irish socialist, a line as stale as it's feeble. The Irish nationalist in the family was Oscar's mother, Lady Wilde—and her Irish nationalism didn't prevent Her Majesty's government from knighting Oscar's father. Just as contemporary gay authors seek echoes of their own experience in Oscar's story, so Hare would seem to be seeking validation of his own persecution as an English socialist. He stumbles much closer to the truth early in Act One when Lord Alfred returns to the Cadogan and bemoans his lover's inability to stop making jokes. Hare even has Bosie quote the crack that did for him. Sir Edward Carson, Q.C., had Queensberry's list of East End rent boys with whom Wilde had supposedly dallied—"feasting with panthers," as he called these transitory exchanges up against the walls, round the back of pubs. Working his way down the list, Carson asked if Wilde had ever "kissed" a boy called Walter Grainger. "Oh, dear no," shrieked Oscar. "He was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly." The joke turned the courtroom against him. Anyone who makes his living from gags will recognize the moment: it is the curse of the quipster that he never knows when to stop. In a single joke, Wilde had betrayed the link between his ornate epigrammatic social comedy and his sexual tastes. Woody Allen would understand: at his first press conference after the Mia Farrow/Soon-Yi/porno pics/child abuse scandal broke around him, the comic looked out across the audience and reflexively lapsed into one-liners. The crowd was outraged: wisecracks? at a time like this? Wilde made his name by offering Trivial Comedy to Serious People; the same formula destroyed him. The real tragedy is that this greatest of jokesmiths has fallen into the hands of portentous dullards who insist only on the importance of being earnest.

Which brings us to the differences between each man's use of language—if, indeed, such a phrase can be applied to such a windy polemicist as Hare. Dialogue in Hare plays is mostly a question of position-taking: he seems to take a perverse pleasure in letting the air out of human conversation. For Wilde, he has eschewed the epigrammatic style. Instead, by Act Two, the gross, seedy, pasty playwright adopts something closer to the exaggerated badgering of latterday British funny men like John Cleese or Stephen Fry. It's almost as if, unable to match the verisimilitude of Fry's cinematic Wilde, Hare can only offer a bad impression of Fry himself—not rapierlike wit but sledgehammer sarcasm. In Naples, after Bosie has sated himself on a bit of rough trade called Galileo, Wilde remarks scornfully on civilization's progress: "Just three hundred years ago the name Galileo was attached to an intelligence that powered the Renaissance and took mankind to an understanding of his own condition to which he had never previously dared to aspire." Now it's just a fisherman with a big cock. "Powered"? In 1897? It's Neeson who struggles to power the stuff: it spurts, it sticks, it gobbles itself. It is not Wilde.

But the most perverse aspect of the production is the casting: if Neeson is most moviegoers' idea of rugged, hetero manliness, the diminutive Tom Hollander is a

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distillation of every screaming queen cliché you've ever heard, the petulant child who wants all the cakes for himself. It is impossible to see why even the most ravenous gay would do anything with this whiny twerp other than poke him and head for the door. Instead of the contrast in ages, there is only the weird contrast in heights: Neeson is a giant, Hollander a shrimp. Together, they look not like lovers, but like a deliberately mismatched vaudeville act—Abbott and Costello, or Edgar Bergen and his wooden puppet Charlie. In *The Judas Kiss*, Hare and Eyre run up against the same problem as *Skylight*: they cannot make you believe that these people have any kind of relationship. A play about love has a transparent lack of it.

Hare insists that he wasn't intimidated by all the other plays about Wilde. Indeed not. With typical perverseness, he seems deliberately to have eliminated all the potentially interesting perspectives—that of, say, Carson, Lady Queensberry, Wilde's wife Constance—until what's left has been drained of all dramatic energy. For my money, the truest Wilde of the moment is the supporting player in *The Invention of Love*, Stoppard's play about A. E. Housman currently at the National in London. It would be interesting, too, to test our own "moral hypocrisy" and see a play from the point of view of Walter Grainger or one of Wilde's other rent boys, many of them under age. A film about a man obsessed with a thirteen-year-old girl (*Lolita*) can't get a distributor in the America of 1998, but a fellow who buggers fifteen-year-old boys too poor and desperate to have any choice in the matter is the hero of the age.

Incidentally, David Hare is sniffy about critics who point out that such and such an event didn't actually occur: drama, he says, is an act of the imagination. The question, though, is whether Hare's imagination improves on reality: in *The Judas Kiss*, Wilde lunches in Bosie's room at the Cadogan on lobster with crushed garlic and tarragon. In real life, he went that day for lunch at the Holborn Viaduct Hotel—a less impressive menu but a more defiant and theatrical gesture.

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Art

Soutine at the Jewish Museum

by Mario Naves

Walking through the exhibition "An Expressionist in Paris: The Paintings of Chaim Soutine," I was put in mind of the philosopher Susanne K. Langer and her book *Problems of Art*, published in 1957.[1] In a chapter titled "Expressiveness," Langer differentiates between "the expression of feeling in a work of art" and self-expression. For Langer, expressiveness is experience given shape and vitality through the artist's realization of form. "What [the artist] expresses," she writes, "is . . . not his own actual feelings, but what he knows about human feeling." The jumble of life, then, is not explicated but made recognizable and whole. Langer adds that this "knowledge may actually exceed his entire personal experience." In contrast, she brusquely likens self-expression to a crying baby. Giving precedence to the artist's psychological disposition, self-expression surrenders the artwork's structural logic. That such logic reinforces the aesthetic—and, yes, emotive—capabilities of a work of art is lost on those who make self-expression their métier. Cézanne, for example, may have been a cold fish, but could anyone dispute the "expressiveness" of his paintings?

The paintings of Chaim Soutine (1893–1943) exemplify the dilemma of self-expression. I don't mean to imply that his *oeuvre* is equivalent to a child wailing for its mother. Soutine's work is, after all, credible and handsome. Yet it is rarely moving—at least, in a way that we feel we *should* be moved by it. Visitors to "An Expressionist in Paris" will, certainly, exit the show with a definite impression of Soutine's art. Soutine's imagery—with its page boys, pastry cooks, and carcasses—is forceful. The work's tangled surfaces, heated colors, and roiling brushwork will leave their mark. Not a few viewers will ruminate on the instability of Soutine's psyche and recall him as an artist given to violent emotions. Such observations have merit. But how many viewers will find themselves engaged with the paintings half as deeply as Soutine was himself? How many would want to go that far? My guess is very few. For what defines Soutine as an artist is a striving for catharsis that remained unfulfilled.

The last time New York saw a retrospective of Soutine's work was at the Museum of Modern Art in 1950. "An Expressionist in Paris" will, in all probability, be the only opportunity a generation will get to see the work in depth. As such, it is a superlative

1 "An Expressionist in Paris: The Paintings of Chaim Soutine" opened at the Jewish Museum, New York, on April 26, 1998, and remains on view through August 16, 1998. The exhibition will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (September 27, 1998–January 3, 1999) and the Cincinnati Art Museum (February 14–May 2, 1999). A catalogue of the exhibition, by Norman L. Kleeblatt and Kenneth E. Silver, has been published by the Jewish Museum and Prestel-Verlag (208 pages, $65; $29.95 paper).

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chance to acquaint oneself with the paintings of this fierce, if problematic, artist. In an age of blockbusters one is tempted to remark that the exhibit includes a "mere" fifty-six paintings. Curators Norman L. Kleeblatt and Kenneth E. Silver, however, make their case for Soutine with uncommon diligence. Kleeblatt and Silver posit Soutine as a "liminal" figure—an outsider both in relation to the European avant-garde and as a Jew in Paris. More importantly, they celebrate his paintings as painting. Given the luxuriant nature of Soutine's art, any other approach would be tantamount to fraud.

"An Expressionist in Paris" is divided into three sections, each devoted to a different critical interpretation of Soutine's art. We are led through galleries featuring Soutine the primitive, the master painter, and, finally, the prophet—prophet, that is, of Abstract Expressionism. It is debatable whether such categories add to our appreciation of Soutine's work. As topics for inquiry, they are better suited to a catalogue essay than to the arrangement of pictures, which is likely to result in a misrepresentation of the art. The installation, however, underplays the regimentation of the exhibition's thesis. Even so, the show is somewhat misleading. It ends, for example, with a gallery of landscapes. They are among Soutine's most emphatic pieces and make for a knock-out finale, but the paintings date from the early 1920s. Works that postdate them are included in the beginning and mid-point of the exhibition. Accustomed as we are to chronological surveys of artists's careers, "An Expressionist in Paris" leaves us with a misleading assessment of Soutine's progress as an artist.

Then again, how important is a straightforward assessment of Soutine's progress? In her catalogue essay, "The Late Works: Regression or Resolution?," Esti Dunow considers the distinctions between Soutine's early and late work. Until I read it, however, I had not given Soutine's development a second thought. The show's tripartite structure doesn't, as one might suppose, cloud Soutine's maturation as a painter; rather, it divulges the constancy of his vision. One could speak of pictures that are more composed—or, should one say, less frenzied?—than others. This might lead to an analysis of how he approached his chosen art form at different times in his life. But Soutine, in a sense, came to us whole. "An Expressionist in Paris" reveals an artist both self-confident and monomaniacal. There is no sense of evolution or exploration to the work. His is an art without scope. Soutine's paintings are flawed by the tortuous confines of his own world view.

A friend once stated that Edward Hopper was a great artist but a so-so painter. The converse is true for Soutine: he was a so-so artist but a great painter. Soutine avoided the theatrics typical of Expressionist art. He achieved this feat chiefly through his extraordinary gift as a paint handler. Who can doubt his love of oils? Soutine's scraping, dabbing, dotting, and slashing of paint is fervent and expert. The blouse of the reclining woman in *Siesta* (c. 1934) and the frock of *The Pastry Cook* (c. 1927) have enough gusto to sustain an entire painting. In Soutine's pictures, the world is rendered as flesh. People, animals, houses, hills, and kettles all share the same membranelike skin. Consequently, the images have a fragility, as if they were capable of being bruised. Yet even when a flurry of brushstrokes approaches the hysterical—as in *Group of Trees* (c. 1922)—we never question its veracity. Soutine's French Expressionism makes German Expressionism look thin and mannered. It reminds us that what we may admire about, say, Ernst Kirchner is not his passion, but, rather, his style.

Soutine's authenticity does, however, have its limits. The paintings are unremitting. However breathtaking their surfaces, bravado alone cannot compensate for the one-note character of the work. And what a note! Each painting is pitched at such a level of intensity that one is grateful for the respite offered by a negligible work like *Young English Girl* (c. 1934). Oddly, though,

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the work doesn't grate. We savor each painting's sumptuousness, but remain distanced from raw emotionality. A wall label informs us that "Soutine's painting was the residue of a 'process' in which the artist seemed to lose all sense of self in the ecstatic moment of creation." I don't doubt the bit about "the ecstatic moment of creation." But the loss of "all sense of self"? Soutine's sense of self is omnipresent and indomitable. In painting after painting, he imposes himself on the subject. This accounts for the cloistered tenor of the work and explains why Soutine was classified, at one time, as a primitive.

That Soutine's art had little room for anyone but the artist himself is particularly blatant in the portraits. However soulful his subjects may appear—whether it be the village idiot or Madeleine Castaing, Soutine's patron—they remain anonymous. Rembrandt may have been his hero, but Soutine lacked the Dutch Master's empathy. Soutine blanketed his rage onto the sitter. The portraits, ultimately, have nothing to do with the other person and everything to do with Soutine. The two finest portraits in the exhibition are atypical. No one would mistake *Portrait of a Man (Emil Lejeune)* (c. 1922–23) or *Woman in Red* (c. 1923–24) for works by anyone else but Soutine. Both are characteristically stormy with contorted figures made up of so much Silly Putty. They are also, however, real people. Looking at the supercilious expression on Monsieur Lejeune's face, one gets a good idea of how highly he esteemed himself. One gets a good idea of what Soutine thought of him, too. This give-and-take is rare in his work.

Soutine captured more personality with the title figures of *Still Life with Herrings* (c. 1916), and, in fact, dead animals gave rise to some of Soutine's lushest painting. But his best paintings are the landscapes. Like van Gogh, an artist whom Soutine supposedly hated and without whom his art is unimaginable, Soutine found in landscape a subject pliable enough to withstand his vision. He saw in nature underlying rhythms that echoed the turbulence of his temperament. The landscapes have the sinew and sweat of a wrestling match. Trees stretch arthritically over the expanse of the canvas. Houses pulse, thrust, and dip with malevolent force. Hills are writhing masses of brawn shoved into the viewer's space. A few of the pieces are near-abstractions, as brushstrokes snarl into clotted skeins of nubby paint. What prevents them from being too much is their pathos. Van Gogh, one feels, found solace in his cypress trees and starry nights. Soutine was not so fortunate. His paintings evince an artist arduously longing for a release that was never forthcoming. Frustration gives these tumultuous paintings their power; it also explains their marginality.

To come to the conclusion that Soutine was a failed artist, however, seems as unjust as claiming that he made the world safe for Francis Bacon. In our culture of diminished expectations—where, as one wag had it, Morris Louis begins to look like Michelangelo—we are likely to esteem Soutine's struggle highly, even if that struggle remained largely unrealized. Still, the merits of his art are not all negative. His knack as a painter—a pure painter one is tempted to append—is irrefutable. That's why a lot of us will come back to him with respect, if only for one painting at a time. Soutine, like his friend Amedeo Modigliani, will continue to rest as a minor light in the pantheon of twentieth-century artists—an honorable painter good for a modest charge. For what "An Expressionist in Paris" confirms is that Soutine, too, is a stylist rather than a fully rounded artist. That his work shows us what talented stylists are capable of is true enough. It also shows us why they don't fly as high as the masters.

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Music

The Kirov Opera at the Met

by John Simon

The Kirov Opera Festival at the Met requires some discussion of nomenclature.[1] St. Petersburg's principal opera house, the Mariinsky, rebuilt in its present form in 1860, was baptized after one of Russia's empresses; its name, like that of the city itself, then kept changing. The Kirov name derives from that of an assassinated commissar, but in 1991, with the passing of Communism, the name reverted to Mariinsky, except for export purposes, where it is still Kirov.

Under the leadership of its gifted director, the peripatetic, not to say ubiquitous, Valery Gergiev, the Mariinsky has become truly cosmopolitan. Russian operatic productions have tended to be conservative, indeed retrograde, but that has been changing, as the Kirov's 1992 visit to New York made clear. This time around we were treated to several performances each of Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, Borodin's *Prince Igor*, Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa*, and Prokofiev's *Betrothal in a Monastery*, the whole preceeded by a gala performance of selections from these and other operas, including some Italian ones sung in Italian.

Most impressive about the gala was the permanently onstage chorus of Kirovians augmented by Met choristers. Unlike in the West, where only the men wear regulation outfits (i.e., tuxedos), all the sopranos wore the same sequined black evening dresses, while the altos wore black without sequins but with something like silver dickeys—nice in a regimented sort of way. At first, their sound was a bit foursquarely army chorusy, but soon became refined, indeed exquisite.

The overall impression from the first half of the gala was that the women, mostly svelte and alluring, sang and also looked better than the male soloists. The exception was Marina Shaguch, rather stout in a duet from *Iolanta*, but vocally outstanding. There was, however, no trace of her in the four subsequent performances I caught, though, to be sure, casts rotated. The tenor soloists were particularly unimposing, a phenomenon not unknown in Western opera houses. The women were also relatively free of that somewhat guttural and strident sound associated with Slavic women singers of the past. Italian arias, though, whether by men or women, did not sound truly Italianate, but not provincial or parochial either.

The second half of the gala was the entire Polovtsian act from *Prince Igor* in the old, superseded sets and costumes. For all their obvious desuetude, they allowed us to follow the dancing much more clearly than the new version. The Kirov orchestra played exhilaratingly for Gergiev. But the baton, too, rotated: a second-night performance of *Ruslan* under Alexander Titov sounded less

1 The Kirov Opera Festival, "A Celebration of Russian Opera," was presented at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, from April 23, 1998, through May 9.

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good. The old Fokine dances for *Igor*, however, looked as spry as they must have a century ago.

Prince Igor (1890), the first item in repertory, the only opera by Alexander Borodin, full-time chemist and part-time composer, was left unfinished by him. Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov eventually completed the music, but his libretto remains a mess. Here we got the score as further revised by Yuri Falik, but what sort of opera has a major character, Prince Galitsky, scheme ruthlessly in Act One, only to disappear thereafter? Whether it helps to know the ancient underlying epic, *The Tale of Prince Igor*, I cannot tell.

The gallant Igor, Prince of Seversk, was first victorious over the nomadic Polovtsian heathens, but then, together with his son, Vladimir, captured by them. Their leader, Khan Konchak, treats his captives magnanimously, even offering them freedom if they would promise to stop fighting him, which the equally magnanimous Igor refuses. Meanwhile his somewhat less magnanimous son conducts a clandestine love affair with Konchakovna, the Khan's daughter. Oglour, a Polovtsian convert to Christianity, helps Igor escape, but Vladimir stays behind to marry Konchakovna. Igor returns to his grieving wife, Yaroslavna, whose would-be usurper brother, Prince Galitsky, has disappeared. The Russians prepare to resume fighting the Tatars.

There was good but not outstanding singing from Nikolai Putilin's Igor, Larissa Diadkova's Konchakovna, and Vladimir Vaneev's Konchak, though I preferred Askar Abdrazakov at the gala. Galina Gorchakova barked a bit as Yaroslavna, but Vladimir Ognovenko's clarion bass, large frame, and histrionic bravado made Galitsky the star attraction. Least impressive was the squeaky tenor Yuri Marusin as Vladimir. The modernist sets and costumes by Yuri Kharikov were opulent but distracting: there were miles and miles of Mylar to blind the audience and make the choreography hard to follow. Meaningless abstractions seemingly of cotton wool, and aluminum strips curling above an open field were puzzling, as were the immensely tall but absurdly narrow Polovtsian tents that kept on growing until they noisily collapsed to make room for the dancers.

The awkwardness of Georgy Isaakian's staging came to a head in Igor's return to his wife. In their final reunion, she stood there like a lump stage left as he strolled on from the right, having presumably gone out for some cigarettes. Still, Borodin's music had its valiant moments, and the Polovtsian dances came off splendidly as both ballet and lilting choral song. As for the text, how many times can we be told that night is falling or that dawn is about to break?

Next came the most recent of the operas, Prokofiev's *Betrothal in a Monastery* (1946), based on Sheridan's play *The Duenna*. I am not sure what makes this work so seductive to opera composers (most recently, and quite ably, Roberto Gerhard), though this tale of two young couples in eighteenth-century Seville conquering their own confusions and outwitting a parental plot for a loveless mismatch has its commedia dell'arte charms. The scheming fish merchant Mendoza, who hopes to marry pretty, young Louisa, but is hoodwinked into settling for her elderly and unsightly duenna, is a rather anti-Semitic figure in Sheridan, but is palliated in the libretto by Prokofiev and his second (common-law) wife, the Jewish Mira Mendelson.

This work, practically unknown in the West, tells an amiably silly story, but allows for plenty of madcap action, including a comically garbed onstage band rehearsal, carousing monks, and dithering nuns. It is opera buffa composed with bold harmonies, idiosyncratic but uncluttered orchestration, and damned good tunes. Here again the women sounded better on the whole. Anna Netrebko was a stunning and exquisitely sung Louisa, whose brother, Ferdinand, in love with her chum Clara (fetchingly sung and embodied by Marianna Tarassova), is friends with the penniless young nobleman Antonio, who eventually wins his beloved

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Louisa, despite her father, Don Jerome, who promises her to Mendoza. Ferdinand, too, gets his Clara, on the verge of becoming a nun.

Both Yevgeni Akimov's Antonio and Vassily Gerello's Ferdinand were passable. As Don Jerome, Nikolai Gassiev did nicely, including playing the musical glasses. Sergei Aleksashkin (Mendoza) and Larissa Diadkova (Duenna) handled the comic parts zestfully. The drunken monks' chorus, with Vladimir Vaneev as a despotic Father Superior, was lustily sung and acted, Vladislav Pazi proving himself an able stage director. Alla Kozhenkova's sets and costumes were attractive and witty, the main design element being a huge vertical fan that would periodically go horizontal, revealing behind it a variety of amusing vistas. Sparklingly conducted by Gergiev, this was a production to do any Western opera house proud.

Hitherto, *Betrothal* was available only in a one-CD cross section sung in German (Berlin Classics 2081, and quite good); now at last Phillips has brought out the entire opera with pretty much the same forces as were heard here, and well worth acquiring.

Ruslan and Lyudmila proved most disappointing. Mikhail Glinka's 1842 fairy-tale opera is based on an early Pushkin poem, for which the poet did not live to write the libretto; five others did. Lyudmila, Princess of Kiev, is abducted by an evil sorcerer, the dwarf Chernomor. Her father, Grand Prince Svetozar, promises her hand to the suitor who rescues her, even though she had already chosen the knight Ruslan. Separately setting out to find her are Ruslan; Ratmir, Prince of Khazan (a contralto); and Farlaf, a cowardly Varangian prince. Ruslan is aided by the good magician, Finn, and eventually joins forces with Ratmir, who has yielded to the entreaties of Gorislava, the loving maiden who has followed him everywhere. Meanwhile the wicked sorceress Naina is helping Farlaf.

Lyudmila, in Chernomor's captivity, languishes bored and furious, but, just as her trio of liberators arrives, the dwarf puts her into a drugged sleep. Though Ruslan vanquishes Chernomor in single combat, he cannot awaken his beloved. Farlaf, guided by Naina, makes off with her to Kiev, but she sleeps on. Ruslan finally wakes her with a magic ring Finn gives him. Farlaf is shamed, Ruslan marries Lyudmila, Ratmir and Gorislava are another happy couple (though he has a whole harem waiting back home), and there is universal rejoicing.

Such a story requires great music to make it palatable, but this Glinka only intermittently provides. The original décor, however faithfully re-created, merely emphasizes the archaic quaintness of the piece. Most of the singing, even with the second cast, was workmanlike, although the lovely Anna Netrebko had to put up with Vladimir Vaneev, an over-the-hill and galumphing Ruslan of strong but unlovely voice. Farlaf, once Chaliapin's and Fyodor Stravinsky's role, was to have been sung by the good Vladimir Ognovenko, who was ill (much illness among these Russians, no doubt owing to our nasty American climate) and had to be replaced. As a court bard predicting events, Yuri Marusin was again acidic-sounding, and Zlata Bulycheva was an undistinguished Ratmir. The rest did well enough in Lofti Mansouri's uninspired staging. Mansouri is one of several Westerners recruited by the Kirov; reciprocally, Gergiev is principal guest conductor at the Met.

There is nice dancing—Fokine again—as Naina's seductresses try to ensnare Ratmir and Ruslan, and almost succeed; some of the costumes, too, were appealing. The opera rather drags on, as does *Prince Igor*; I suppose those long Russian nights of snow took a lot of music to warm them up.

Things greatly improved again with Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa*, an opera scarcely known in the West, and the Festival's second major revelation. This 1884 work is vastly superior to the monstrously overrated *Queen of Spades*, and second only to Tchaikovsky's masterpiece, *Eugene Onegin*. It is a mite slow to get started, but quickly gains in in-

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terest, and in its final act reaches not only sublimity, but also extraordinary originality. It concerns Ivan Mazeppa, the eighteenth-century Ukrainian separatist revered by the Ukrainians and execrated by the Russians. This is not the naked strapped-to-a-wild-horse hero of Romantic painting and poetry, but the tough hetman (overlord) who at first was Peter the Great's trusted ally, then sought help from the Swedes to set himself up as ruler of a free Ukraine. In the opera, based on Pushkin's poem "Poltava," he woos his own goddaughter Maria, child of the Kossack judge Konchubey, and she falls for him despite his seventy years. Konchubey opposes their union, but the enamoured Maria lets herself be abducted by Mazeppa. Andrey, a young man who loves her but has been rejected by her, carries Konchubey's message of Mazeppa's treachery to the czar, but he, unbelieving, has Konchubey delivered into Mazeppa's hands.

Nobly defying torture, the imprisoned Konchubey refuses to reveal where his treasure is hidden. After testing Maria about who is dearer to her, he or her father, and receiving the desired answer, Mazeppa condemns Konchubey to death. Lyubov, Konchubey's wife, sneaks into Mazeppa's palace and enlightens her daughter about the imminent beheading. The two women rush off to the public square, but arrive too late for Maria to use her influence. Konchubey is executed, and Maria goes mad with grief.

The last, and finest, act begins with a symphonic poem about the battle of Poltava, nicely staged here with an inner curtain representing a battle fresco, in front of which a military band plays along with the pit orchestra. Then comes the last scene, in which Andrey, who vainly tried to find and kill Mazeppa during Peter's rout of the Swedes at Poltava, wanders into Konchubey's now ruined garden where, in childhood, he and Maria played together. Mazeppa and his henchman Orlik arrive fleeing from the Russians; Andrey challenges Mazeppa, who shoots and mortally wounds him. Now Maria appears, too, and Mazeppa, who did care for her, is shocked by her Ophelia-like madness, but the henchman drags the hetman away. Andrey, dying, pleads for a last embrace from Maria, who thinks he is her baby, cradles him, and sings him to his last sleep.

As Yuri Alexandrov directs here, however, Andrey crawls toward Maria in vain; she sings the lullaby standing up, not even looking at him. Either way, this duet between moribund loser and lost madwoman is one of the most moving pieces of operatic writing I know; even the inevitable Yuri Marusin's brittle tenor (here almost excusable) could not hurt it, and Olga Guryakova was good enough vocally and dramatically to make this closing scene shatteringly beautiful.

Nikolai Putilin's Mazeppa was adequate, as was, more or less, Vladimir Vaneev's Konchubey. The sets, replicating the originals, worked, as did the original choreography. More important was the savvy libretto by V. P. Burenin, further improved by the composer himself, and the canny way in which the music proceeds with great variety through what could easily have become depressing. So Eduard Nápravník, conductor of the Mariinsky premiere, bemoaned its "heaping scene upon scene, each more horrible than the last: enmity, betrayal, torture, execution, murder, madness—there is nowhere for the listener to relax." (I quote from Richard Taruskin's highly informative article in *The New York Times* of May 3, 1998.)

Not so, however. If there is great variety between types of anguish, if the plot actually holds you spellbound, and if the fine music is played as well as it was by Gergiev and his orchestra, this "astonishing masterpiece of violence and dark cravings, of doom and desolation" (Taruskin) amply holds its own. As does a Kirov festival two out of four of whose offerings score high. If only the Met had such a batting average!

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The media

Politics about nothing

by James Bowman

If anything so emphatically and inescapably present as television could be said to have a history, the final episode of "Seinfeld" is destined for an honored place in its oxymoronic annals, if only because of the record $1.5 million and upwards it was said to have charged for thirty seconds of advertising. Who will care about this astonishing number in a few years' time, when it is as meaningless as the rates charged by "The Honeymooners" are today? Yet the "show about nothing" may deserve a special place among the hits of yesteryear because it has refined to its essence the art of television—which is also about nothing. Even things that are something, like world news events, are reduced to the status of nothing when they become television. Just as the tornado that flattens your house is not the one that was on TV, so the one that is on TV is by definition the one that happened to somebody else. And if it never happens to you, it's not real. You can take it or leave it, like an episode of "Seinfeld."

Not that "nothing" is not a big subject. Boring, but big. People who live lives as cavernously hollow as those of the "Seinfeld" characters must fill them with something, and the insubstantial odds and ends of pop cultural triviality and personal self-absorption with which their nothingness is stuffed could supply—and doubtless has supplied—the material for many a long summer's day toiling over ponderous analyses in the academic vineyards. Such pointless labor at least fills in the time for those whose own lives, spent in fantasy worlds of post-capitalist, post-imperial, post-patriarchal, post-heterosexual ideologies, have also been drained of substance. The trouble is that the habit of meditation on nothing does not seem to be containable, and what used to be the matter of real history is increasingly becoming mere TV—a succession of gestures and attitudes which no one any longer expects to correspond to anything real.

A good illustration is the anti-tobacco hysteria which seems these days to take up so much of the time of our public men and women. In April there were a particularly amusing few days in which the Republicans, doubtless in pursuit of Newt Gingrich's avowed goal of not allowing President Clinton to portray him as soft on tobacco, as it were, tried to turn the tables on the Democrats by proposing a link between legislation aimed at preventing teenagers from smoking and a more general anti-drug measure, since teenage drug use is said to be up. Democratic claims that they were blurring the focus on the unique evil of smoking seemed to be lent substance (if anything in this whole sorry spectacle could be said to be substantial) when Gingrich made the mistake of saying that teen smoking "has nothing to do with Joe Camel" but a lot to do with "Leonardo DiCaprio smoking in the movie Titanic."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth

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when President Clinton seized the opportunity they provided to attack Gingrich: "Now, some in Congress say that teen smoking has nothing to do with Joe Camel," he said, not mentioning the Speaker's name. But both "medical science and common sense," he insisted, took a contrary view: "teen smoking has everything to do with Joe Camel—with unscrupulous marketing campaigns that prey on the insecurities and dreams of our children." Talk about your unscrupulous marketing campaigns! "Medical science," of course, is silent on the subject of advertising and its influence, but social science and common sense are at best divided and, in one study at least, suggest that banning advertising actually increases teen smoking.

Not that the facts ever mattered in the slightest, any more than they do in the frequently reiterated but demonstrably untrue assertion that "smoking-related illnesses" impose costs on "us" that must be recovered from the tobacco companies. In fact, smokers are net assets to the public weal as they not only pay more in taxes but also die sooner and of less lingering illnesses than they would if they lived on into extreme old age. It is a fact of apparently no interest on either side of the political aisle. Certainly it had no influence on the legislation crafted by the Clinton Administration in collaboration with the Republican Senator John McCain which amounted to a blatant shakedown to extract from the tobacco companies over half a trillion dollars for purposes to be determined by politicians.

As Tom Daschle, the Senate Minority Leader, said in taking up the President's quarrel with Gingrich: "I think the Republican leadership has to make a decision—whether they're for Joe Camel or whether they're for the kids of the United States of America who are looking to us for leadership on tobacco policy. . . . Newt Gingrich seems to be hinting now that he's more on Joe Camel's side." Never mind that these alternative allegiances—hmm, kids of America or Joe Camel, which should I choose?—are comically unrelated to any real-world choices. The gesture is all that matters. Clearly, Daschle himself cannot possibly suppose that Gingrich wants the youth of America to take up cigarettes.

In fact, he would have a good argument available to him if he did, as Michael Kelly showed in *The Washington Post* when he pointed out that smoking was the safest form of teenage rebellion there is. But such subtleties are irrelevant in the gestural politics of *fin de siècle* America. As John F. Harris and Juliet Eilperin of the *Post* commented, "the alacrity—and obvious glee—with which Democrats challenged Gingrich's motives raised questions about their own" since "a senior Democratic congressional aide and some administration officials said many House Democrats have already abandoned any expectation that a tobacco bill will pass this year. Instead, they are looking forward to attacking Gingrich and Republicans as handmaidens of the industry in the fall campaign."

And what an easy job they'll have of it too, at least if Gingrich's feeble attempt to match Clinton in cheap demagoguery is anything to go by. His parry to the president's thrust was to condemn him for smoking cigars, and particularly for smoking one when the sexual harassment lawsuit by Paula Jones was thrown out. "I don't smoke cigars when I'm celebrating," Gingrich is quoted as having said. "I don't send the signal that smoking is okay when you're winning." Clinton, who has so far shown not the slightest sign of shame or embarrassment about anything else—though there is abundant evidence that he has much to be ashamed of—was embarrassed about his celebratory cigar, and apologized for it.

But within a day the Democrats had unveiled their new ad campaign. A poster labeled "Smokin' Newt and the Hard Pack," featured a computer-morphed photo of Gingrich made to look like Joe Camel and offering an open pack of cigarettes to (presumably) the children of America. This promises to be the centerpiece of a more general Democratic campaign extending

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through the congressional elections in November and focusing on the supposed Republican coziness with the tobacco companies coupled with their opposition to "caring" issues such as a minimum wage increase, subsidized daycare, and the extension of Medicare benefits. "It's an issue that can remind people why they dislike Republicans," the Democratic consultant Geoff Garin told *The Wall Street Journal*: "they side with big business against the public good."

The Republicans seemed briefly to have found their own mount in the demagoguery stakes with hearings into abuses in the Internal Revenue Service. She might have been a nice little runner, but she was nobbled at the post by Clinton when he instantly acquiesced in Republican demands for reform of the IRS. Who knows what that means anyway? Meanwhile, Gingrich, terrified as usual by the grinding and clanking of the Clinton propaganda machine, insisted that he was as much in favor as Clinton is of extorting money from the tobacco companies—just not quite so much money. And he wants to return the proceeds to the people in the form of tax cuts instead of spending it on new government programs. He added that he would also join McCain in opposing a limit on the tobacco companies' legal liabilities, noting as others had done the damning evidence that they had engaged in marketing "targeted" at children. Indeed, he claimed that "the McCain bill gives them more than I would give them." Hanging's too good for 'em!

We ought to be ashamed to be represented by politicians who get up to such transparently disingenuous antics. Yet the really amazing thing about them is that they seem to have so little resonance in the general population. The anti-tobacco frenzy seems largely confined to politics and the media, where it has taken on a life of its own, like some ghastly game that, once begun, must be played to the end. Polling data suggest that the American people, for whom the show is ostensibly being put on, do not care all that much one way or the other about punishing the tobacco companies. About a fifth think the McCain legislation is "too lenient" while two-fifths think it "too hard" on the tobacco companies—and the rest don't care.

Of course, they ought to care. That governments at every level can demand and are demanding money with menaces (in the threat of ruinous lawsuits), over and above the tax liability common to everybody, from people engaged in legal activities, ought to be a matter of extreme concern to even the most casual of civil libertarians. But somehow the Seinfeldian haze has descended on everybody. Our politics, like our TV, is now "about nothing" and we like it that way. As R. Emmett Tyrrell, editor of *The American Spectator*, has observed, "Now that the Cold War is over and the Welfare State is a dead issue one is struck by the paltriness of the issues that fire the politicians' phony passions," and he cites Henry Kissinger's aphorism about academic politics being so savage because so little is at stake.

It is an observation that might be made from either end of the political spectrum. Frank Rich—commenting on what he takes to be the equivalent nastiness of Bill Clinton, who attempted to make the Nixonian claim of "executive privilege," and the Republican congressman, Dan Burton of Indiana, who called Clinton a "scumbag"—wrote in *The New York Times* that

> in a political war in which all sides insult our intelligence at every turn, there's no longer any hope of finding a hero. Our only choice is to pick our poison. This week's menu featured Presidential stonewalling and Congressional thuggery: Bill Clinton explicitly donned the mantle of Richard Nixon while his most noisy current antagonist, Dan Burton, expertly conjured the sleaze of Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn. The race to the bottom doesn't get any lower than this.

Yet the shock of seeing Mr. Tyrrell and Mr. Rich agreeing about anything begins to dissipate on closer examination. The com-

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parison of Congressman Burton to Joseph McCarthy turns out to depend on Burton's supposedly having "doctored" evidence from tapes made of conversations between Webster Hubbell and his wife. This "doctoring," which Rich comically calls "almost a verbatim rerun of the Army-McCarthy hearings," consisted of Burton's having omitted from his transcript of the tapes a remark by Hubbell which would have exonerated Hillary Clinton on the charge of having participated in the billing fraud for which he, Hubbell, went to prison—as if that charge were the only one, or even the main one, that had been brought against her.

Yet Rich was only joining in the howling of the media pack, which pretended to suppose that this remark was more generally, if not universally, exculpatory and that it had been hidden deliberately by Burton—though he made the complete tapes available to journalists and urged them to listen to them to understand the context. The extravagance of comparing his action to McCarthyite tactics was admittedly Rich's own idea, but it points up the extent to which the Seinfeldian politics of the Nineties is working to the advantage of Clinton and the Democrats. They invite the Republicans to get into a contest of competing demagogueries as an indirect way of inviting long-headed and allegedly nonpartisan pundits like Rich to conclude, more in sorrow than in anger, that each side is as bad as the other. It was by the same method that the campaign finance scandals of 1996 were rendered innocuous.

The recent film of Joe Klein's *Primary Colors*, under the guise of offering us a glimpse behind the façade of American politics at the reality beneath, put the case in stark terms. John Travolta in the Bill Clinton role wins over his young assistant, who is temporarily disgusted with his chicanery and ready to leave the campaign, by a dazzling speech in which he excuses his cynical, dishonest, and even criminal behavior by claiming that all politicians, including Abraham Lincoln, were just as much "whores" as he was. It is the claim of the whore throughout the ages, of course, that others are no better. In the same way, the most revealing comment on the Webster Hubbell tapes was the one where he admits to his wife that he did the deed for which he went to jail, but that every other lawyer in America (except, presumably, Hillary Clinton) had done the same.

There was once a time when any decent person would have seen through such an appallingly self-serving claim, but now we are agnostic about it. It would not be quite hip to call it a damnable lie; that might even be thought to imply naïveté—than which no charge is more damning to journalists and others who fancy themselves as adornments of the cognitive elite. In any case, in a time of peace and absurd prosperity, there really is little at stake in our politics. It is a politics about nothing—or at least we feel at liberty to present it to ourselves as such—which offers us the chance to laugh at the Bill Clinton scandal follies and the comically overearnest attempts of the Keystone Kop Republicans to bring the president to book, should we find such things funny. Or we can turn them off like "Seinfeld"—which, like so much else that we used to care about, is history now.

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Verse chronicle

Soiled desires

by William Logan

Sylvia Plath would have turned sixty-six this year, and it's hard to imagine that burning, frantic, misshapen talent receiving Social Security. She died unwrinkled as a Romantic, older than Shelley but younger than Byron. Whether her talent would have developed further is that deceitful question we ask those who die young—the poems might have continued in angry gouts, or found domestic contentments, or withered up completely. She might have ended a fussy old Wordsworth, blowzy embarrassment to the Plathites who made her a feminist martyr; more likely she'd have reveled in each new award, a grande dame cigarette-waving into her seventh decade, unrepentant as an aging Hollywood star.

Plath is a crucial figure in American poetry. Understudy to confessional poets who were older, even much older, she exceeded their worst nightmares—however darkly Robert Lowell's madness rises into his poems, he sounds like a scholar in slippers compared to her ("My mind's not right" isn't half as scary as "Lady Lazarus," though it's better poetry). *Ariel* (1965) was not just the climax—it was the end of confessional poetry. No matter how shocking the revelation or how steely the revealer, every confessing poet afterward suffered her terms of engagement.

Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters,* which in January burst unexpected into print, includes three decades of poems written secretly to his dead wife (only a few had appeared in print before).[1] Hughes has been famously silent about Plath's suicide, and just as famously stoic in the face of thirty years of vicious feminist attacks that branded him a murderer ("Hughes" has been repeatedly chiseled from her gravestone). Only rarely has he bothered to defend himself, and then usually in gruff letters to the editor. His "birthday letters," addressed to Plath, show that keeping silence was a measure of keeping faith.

The faith is much more impressive than the poetry. Though composed over decades, the poems are remarkably similar in their fireside tone and fleshy style (listless at times, at times overstuffed with metaphor). The garrulous free verse is a much toned-down version of Hughes's muscular line. He must get awfully tired of hearing his verse called muscular—the good news is, the verse isn't muscular any longer. That's the bad news, too.

In the long battle over Plath's memory, Hughes's reticence has been dignified, his suffering almost magisterial. The early sympathies were hers by right—abandoned by her husband for another woman and raising two babies in a London flat during one of the most bitter British winters this century, at thirty she squalidly committed suicide, on her knees with her head in a gas oven. Her death grotesquely mimicked the gas-

1 *Birthday Letters*, by Ted Hughes; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 198 pages, $20.

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sing of the Jews at Auschwitz, Jews whose murder she so adroitly appropriated in poems. The publication of her letters and journals (the journals remain unpublished in Britain) and, among a clutch of others, a biography by Anne Stevenson, has slowly redressed the balance.

Hughes was no saint (though often saintly in his treatment of her); but the portrait of Plath that has emerged, with some difficulty, is of a young woman with the grinning rictus of ambition, a terror to friend and enemy alike, selfish, greedy for attention and willing to use any means to achieve it, vindictive, subject to manic rage and blinding depression. She was also a little gauche and new-minted, mocked by fellow students at Cambridge University (she arrived with a matched set of suitcases). One of her early suicide attempts was over being rejected for Frank O'Connor's summer writing course at Harvard. However much her admirers provide one version after another of incense-laced Sylviolatry, the "misfit self-display" and "dybbuk fury" of the letters and journals muscle in. Memoirs by Dido Merwin and Richard Murphy, appended to Stevenson's biography, are x-rays of a woman at the edge of madness.

These rakings of the past are necessary to criticism of Hughes's poetry, because the past puts him in such an awkward position. He can't blame his own wife without attacking the dead, can't defend his actions without seeming exculpatory or self-righteous. The only moral position is supine, and it helps explain why these awkwardly pious poems (dull when they're not overdramatic) cower before events, why in crisis they excuse themselves in metaphor, or flights of rhetorical fancy, or symbolist fairy tale. The poems are a long apologia, but all they can do is prostrate themselves before a memory and clothe themselves in guilt. Any other position would seem monstrous.

There's some revision of Plath's subjects (her earthenware head, her owl), and occasional dry criticism of her ("rhyming yourself into safety"); but mostly this is a shrine, not a star chamber. You need a good biography in order to follow these poems; virtually every incident is better explained in prose. Hughes's version of student life has all the plummy abstractedness of the worst of the *Prelude:*

> The nursery care of nature's leisurely lift
> Towards her fullness, we were careless
> Of grave life, three of us, four, five, six—
> Playing at friendship. Time in plenty
> To test every role—for laughs,
> For the experiment, lending our hours
> To perversities of impulse, charade-like
> Improvisations of the inane,
> Like prisoners, our real life
> Perforce deferred, with the real
> World and self. So, playing at students,
> we filled
> And drunkenly drained, filled and again
> drained
> A boredom, a cornucopia
> Of airy emptiness, of the brown
> And the yellow ale, of makings and
> unmakings . . .

It's not just badly written, it's badly Wordsworthed—*O the brown and the yellow ale!* Here the lovers' first passion is Donne writ small:

> How I smuggled myself, wrapped in you,
> Into the hotel. There we were.
> You were slim and lithe and smooth as
> a fish.
> You were a new world. My new world.
> So this is America, I marvelled.
> Beautiful, beautiful America!

The young married couple later visit the Grand Canyon, "America's big red mamma!" Hughes is bold and big and clumsy, like an action painter given gallons of free paint (he's prone to crude foreshadowing and garden-shed mysticism). Plath's death and her afterlife as vengeful spirit and muse have been a vast private canvas for him. He is, after all, the surviving partner in one of the century's great love stories—these are

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the poems Romeo might have written, or Abelard. But Hughes, a considerable poet when young, has survived to write a poetry of cruel incompetence, with hamhanded allusions to Prufrock's peach and Rupert Brooke and "The Burning Babe."

The poems in *Birthday Letters* have an instinct for the ridiculous. There are touching moments, moments that make you despair for the lives Plath crippled; but the poems collapse in a mumble of metaphor:

> Your typewriter,
> Your alarm clock, your new sentence
> Tortured you, a cruelty computer
> Of agony niceties, daily afresh—
> Every letter a needle, as in Kafka.
> While I, like a poltergeist fog,
> Hung on you, fed on you—heavy,
> drugged,
> With your nightmares and terrors. Inside
> your Bell Jar
> I was like a mannikin in your eyeball.

Later, Plath's father is "The god with the smoking gun"—there's Freud for you! Sometimes the problem's the dry listing of fact, sometimes the teary sentiment:

> Like love forty-nine times magnified,
> Like the first thunder cloudburst engulfing
> The drought in August
> When the whole cracked earth seems to
> quake
> And every leaf trembles
> And everything holds up its arms weeping.

No one who has read the biographies will find much new revealed here; indeed, Hughes is strangely close-mouthed about their lives together. Plath's final days, like his disastrous affair with Assia Wevill (later to kill herself and their child), dissolve in a cloud of metaphor. The secrets of the marriage, however sane or sordid, are kept secret, largely by making it tiresome as any middle-class marriage. So it may have been, but where the facts might have purchase, the poetry can offer only banal insight—thirty years of brooding and all Hughes will hazard is a moral cliché, that he became the embodiment of her father.

Occasionally, only occasionally, as in a poem about their honeymoon, the mists clear for a few lines:

> Spain frightened you. Spain
> Where I felt at home. The blood-raw light,
> The oiled anchovy faces, the African
> Black edges to everything, frightened you.
> Your schooling had somehow neglected Spain.
> The wrought-iron grille, death and the Arab
> drum.

On the honeymoon, Plath gets food poisoning or a fever. She loses all control—shrieks that she's going to die—and Hughes first glimpses the uncontrollable in her, glimpses something a little deranged. The best poem in the book, tellingly, isn't about Plath at all—it's about bats.

Birthday Letters has been welcomed with a pyroclastic flow of praise, more grotesque and misguided compliments than any poetry has probably attracted this century. British poets and critics, mostly male, have been nearly unanimous. For Andrew Motion in *The Times,* where the poems were first serialized, "Reading it is like being hit by a thunderbolt. . . . There is nothing like it in literature. . . . this is his greatest book." For Tom Paulin, "It's a knockout volume, absolutely staggering." Douglas Dunn, in the *Financial Times:* "*Birthday Letters* is of an order that practically places Hughes beyond the ranks of ordinary mortals." Only a few critics have suggested otherwise.

Something happened to Hughes's poetry after Plath's death. Though his first books look like period pieces now, their wrought-iron language and animal passion deepened the psychology of nature well before Lowell's "Skunk Hour." Later the language flattened into conversation or grew muscle-bound (as if it hadn't been mannered enough already), the poems at times surprisingly glandular and amateur. Plath's Faustian bargain was to die young, writing poetry of scathing brilliance; his was to live into old age, having lost his tongue.

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That old rascal John Ashbery has long passed the grand climacteric (he turns seventy-one this year), and perhaps it's too late to expect the dog to learn new tricks. His softly inflated, discount surrealism looks as easy as ever. Like many poets who settle into the comfort of a style, he's inimitable—if you imitated him you'd not just sound like Ashbery, you'd *be* Ashbery. I don't know why poets don't open Renaissance workshops and have apprentice poets knock off poems in the master's style, but perhaps that's what writing workshops do already.

Wakefulness is like a lot of recent Ashbery (has anyone noticed there's an awful lot of recent Ashbery—over 700 pages this decade?), seamless in its disjunctions, playful in its nonsense or pretend sense, irritatingly elusive, woolly and woolgathering.[2] He's like a music-hall comedian who doesn't bother to vary his delivery one year to the next: you hear the catchphrases and you laugh, not because he's funny, but because he's not funny. His comedy has a tragic edge, though he's now less like Keaton than Beckett—with a lot more words.

Ashbery's most delicious lines are about language or literature:

> We thought we had seen a few new
> adjectives, but nobody was too sure. They
> might have been
> gerunds, or bunches of breakfast . . .

The poem drifting off here is titled "Last Night I Dreamed I Was in Bucharest," and the movement toward waking and hunger is something Freud would have understood. It has the dreamy logic that makes so much of Ashbery's poetry a storehouse of half-forgotten phrases, giddy echoes of other poems: Whitman, say ("Once, on Mannahatta's bleak shore,/ I trolled for spunkfish"), or Yeats ("Things break. Yes, they fail/ or they are anchored up ahead"). One poem is composed entirely of quotations.

Ashbery's poems revel in their detachments, their refusal of narrative, their refusal of most of the traditional supports of poetry. He proves how little poetry depends on creating meaning—the urge to make meaning is so strong, the reader will supply what the words cannot. Ashbery's poems indefinitely postpone the promise of sense; but, even as they promise, the poems erase their own existence, falling forward rather than leaning back (poetry is one of the arts that usually depend on acknowledging the past)—you can't remember at the end of a poem how or why it started. The poem itself doesn't remember. Ashbery's poems have the equivalent of Alzheimer's disease.

> He took off in a manner that betokened
> bats
> when it was over and they came over.
> It's time, now, some are good
> and alone,
> lost up unto the rest. They can go and cancel
> around it's too moot to be played at.
> They are, for the rest unsavory,
> thyme in the corral, three jumps from last
> school
> the patio ignited, sworn to safe-conduct,
> like bread out of a school
> conducted at last to here.

Ashbery isn't often so dreadful (there are few lines like "all over the paisley fields dominoes are braying" or "A diagonal lipstick/ chased him across the street"), but when he's bad he's as rotten as poetry gets. The destitution of his phrases is also his strength. His work reminds us how much of contemporary poetry survives on its little narratives, its clumsy emotional urgency: the impertinence of his poems acts most tellingly not in books but one by one in magazines, where they mock little gray-flannel poems (well, poems of any cloth). Ashbery's work looks better the more you forget it (the more you suffer from Alzheimer's, perhaps), and he has become a poet of severe importance for what his verse denies rather than what it accepts. There's scarcely a poem worth reading again; but

2 *Wakefulness*, by John Ashbery; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 80 pages, $20.

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few poets have so cleverly manipulated, or just plain tortured, our soiled desire for meaning. He reminds us that most poets who give us meaning don't know what they're talking about.

Frank Bidart's new poems are nightmare fragments, stories that begin so *in medias res* the *res* are never clear. The hidden stories (often elegies) are sexual, but the sex is shamed or confused—the poems of *Desire* live in mystery and withholding.[3] In this world of secret sharers, where the self reaches toward the rejecting Other, the poems are loveless versions of self-hatred because no Other releases their blocked loathing.

Bidart's earlier dramatic monologues by Nijinsky (1983) and the anorectic Ellen West (1977) carried some of this unlovely passion; but they were preposterous overreadings of character, all too eager to make their points. In *Desire*, other texts lie beneath the texts—Dante and Ovid, who understood the dark torsions of love, shadow the poems like learned vultures. Marcus Aurelius contributes a refrain; Tacitus and Plotinus and the Manichaeans make quiet appearances, as if classical authors had the authority of reassurance. When Bidart retells the story of the disappearance of Varus's legions in the Black Forest, that bedtime tale for bad little Roman boys and girls, it's more moving than the surrounding poems, but awfully like a history lecture. There's even a prose poem on the author's split personality, a sluggish and self-regarding prose poem deriving from Borges's "Borges and I"—"Frank"'s problems as speaker are a long distance from Proust's idea of *le moi profond*.

The shorter poems here prepare the psychology of "The Second Hour of the Night," a masterwork whose first part is as good as anything Bidart has done, juxtaposing the memoirs of Berlioz, whose wife died slowly and horribly, with the death of the poet's mother. The not-so-subtle merger of Bidart's mother and Berlioz's wife, in the erotics implicitly embraced, is the most important psychological gesture in these poems. The second section, alas, is an overlong rehash of Ovid's tale of Myrrha, whose incestuous love for her father causes disaster all around. The myth doesn't nearly repay the thirty pages it takes to recount (it's only two hundred lines in Ovid), and the thwarted love and doom-laden incest are a textbook parody of homosexual psychology.

> As Myrrha is drawn down the dark corridor
> toward her father
>
> not free not to desire
>
> what draws her forward is neither
> COMPULSION nor FREEWILL:—
>
> or at least freedom, here *choice,* is not to be
> imagined as action upon
>
> preference: no creature is free to choose what
> allows it its most powerful, and most
> secret, release . . .

This sounds like a speech for the Mattachine Society. The grief that rises so longingly in the first part is here endlessly deferred until we forget that the Ovid was a means rather than an end. After Myrrha is finally turned into a bush, her crime against nature at last become nature itself, she gives birth to Adonis. If Myrrha is a stand-in for the dying mother, that makes the poet . . . well, the answer isn't exactly modest.

Bidart has been a peculiar predatory poet, restricted to techniques more dramatic than recognizably poetic (witness his frequent soapbox typography)—this has given his monologues an unpleasant hysteria. His poems are too often declaimed from the Greek stage, his personae masked as Fates or Furies. My complaint against Bidart's earlier work was the thinness of the fiction: even Browning, most Jamesian and psychological of poets, could not fully adapt

3 *Desire*, by Frank Bidart; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 59 pages, $20.

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poetry to fiction's grammar of display (though weakness of character accords well with the gestures of satire, as in *Don Juan* or *The Rape of the Lock*). A character like Ellen West can't exceed the drama of her disease—how could she, given a sickness so freighted with meaning, so calculatedly metaphoric? Twenty years before, she would have suffered polio; twenty years later, AIDS. The choice was too easy, easy as the fate of real victims was hard (it takes a Camille to make disease more than its metaphor). Bidart treats homosexual love as a pathology, even a virtuous pathology ("outlaw love," perhaps); but a part of nature can't be against nature—nature is all its instances, not an average.

Karl Kirchwey's new poems are soaked in the blood of empire, the history now roped off for the tourist rather than interred by the historian. *The Engrafted Word* follows the grand tour through Italy and the Mediterranean, a Mediterranean still lying under the shattered visage of Rome (a very bookish Rome).[4] Recent American poetry has been so domestic in its harmonies, so commonplace in private quarrels rather than public angers, a passport elsewhere can be an escape. Kirchwey has a sensitive, even soulful manner (a little too soulful at times)—amid dusty ruins, the cruelty and casual blindness of the past make him wary, embarrassed by the culture he enjoys, embarrassed by the privilege of travel. The tourist is the voyeur of old violence.

Even the empire's humble fish contribute to the gory passions of power:

> a fisherman once surprised Tiberius
> on his rugged island of pleasure;
> there is blood in the crisscross of scales
> where the guards used the gift of the poor
> man to rub the skin off his face.
>
> Beauty and malignant shame mingle
> in a fry of albino gold
> and whiskered calico. Witness this hunger,
> flamboyant and utterly normal,
> as their poached blindnesses suck the mud
> and bask in the sun with a dull glitter.

This calm unfolding of detail has the observant richness of Richard Wilbur, though without the control or taste of meter. Kirchwey dabbles in rhyme (mostly half- or quarter- or eighth-rhyme), and can whisk up pentameter if he wishes; but his flinching from formal responsibilities divorces him from the labored elegance and mannered Europe of so many poets in the Fifties. Kirchwey is much more interesting than most of the New Formalists, many of whom write a pentameter so dull it would qualify for workman's compensation (dullness being an occupational hazard).

At times, when the quatrains slacken or rhythm vanishes down a prosy whirlpool, Kirchwey's poems seem secretly to desire a more stringent measure. The beauty of his withholding eye is not always enough—there are passions in this verse still unexplored. That's why his strangled stoicism is so effective—it admits there's something to be stoic about. The strain between guilty pleasure and innocent passion is the heart of a Christian heritage whose character the ancient world is all too willing to attack.

Kirchwey's tone is sometimes unsteady (there's too much of the mock naïve for my taste), and the poems of New York are less secure in their habitat than the poems of places thousands of miles away—he has a visa for every country but home. Some poems are precious, and a good many end with an earnest hush, the experience exhausted before the poem is over. There's a villanelle so clumsy it made me want to stop writing villanelles. But just when the defects threaten to overwhelm a poetry otherwise so attractive, the lovely lines or near-perfect stanzas show the richness is not its own reward—richness is the salvation of doubt. With such passionate verbal gifts, the way Kirchwey gets things wrong shows how to make them right.

4 *The Engrafted Word*, by Karl Kirchwey; Henry Holt, 65 pages, $13 paper.

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Frederick Seidel treats the high trash of culture with haute seriousness. No one since Marx (a poet of sorts) has written a poetry so poisoned by capitalism; and you can't read Seidel without feeling sympathy for Lenin, without feeling capitalists really should be shot. Seidel is a name-dropper—he rubs shoulders with ambassadors and senators ("My friend/ The junior senator from Nebraska"), French film directors, Racine-quoting raving beauties, louche Euro-trash. The poems in *Going Fast* are a fairyland department store of brand names, always in exquisite taste (so tasteful sometimes they're not brands at all, merely addresses).[5] He knows where to get a suit fitted in Milan, how to have a motorcycle custom designed, who in Paris makes the right bespoke shoes:

> No one has surpassed
> The late George Cleverley's lasts,
> The angle in of the heel, the slightly
> squared-off toe, the line,
> Though Suire at Lobb is getting there.
> His shoes fit like Paradise by the third pair.
> Like they were Eve. The well-dressed man,
> The vein of gold that seems inexhaustible,
> Is a sunstream of urine on its way to the toilet
> bowl.

Such vulgar display, like a closet of Imelda Marcos's pumps, might rouse antipathy in any reader. Seidel began as a Lowell imitator; the poems in his first books, *Final Solutions* and *Sunrise* (both of which I admired), repeated the sins and syntax of the master with ironic flair—now Seidel's irony tends to wear jackboots and carry a ball-peen hammer. There's still power in the blunt phrasings, but the recent books trade in snide juxtapositions (a man "does yoga/ High above the homeless") and cheap shock ("I want to date-rape life," "The smell of sperm on the edge of the axe").

The promise (even the premise) of such poetry is its insider knowledge, its view down the nose toward *hoi polloi,* all the while saying, "But look, I'm a radical, too!" Seidel has a point, if not an important point: the rich suffer as much as anyone, in their way, and their despair has gold-plated ironies. But Seidel wants to eat his cake and have it: he wants to flaunt his connections, rub the reader's nose in wealth, and still sneer at privilege. "We're all guilty," he seems to say, but you can't help feeling he wallows smugly in guilt, considering the company he keeps (his Ducati 916 roars into half a dozen poems, but he can't just ride it—he has to "ride to Syria/ To President Assad").

It's one thing to repent youthful folly, to see the sickening void of conspicuous consumption, another to long for display while beating your breast like a reformed sinner. This may be his analysis of a condition, the capitalist condition that sells sin and salvation too; but Seidel's jet-set tastes and upmarket sinning get pretty tiresome.

> Combine a far-seeing industrialist.
> With an Islamic fundamentalist.
> With an Italian premier who doesn't take
> bribes.
> With a pharmaceuticals CEO who loves
> to spread disease.
> Put them on a 916.
>
> And you get Fred Seidel.

Only in his retelling of Ovid (like Frank Bidart he chooses the myth of Myrrha) is Seidel distracted into a sordid, knowing art. Though banished in the end, Ovid knew the richness of Rome and used its vanities (religious as well as retail) beneath the raw matter of poetry.

Things happen to August Kleinzahler, any-old-thing kind of things; and you can't see why they should be interesting to someone else when they're not all that interesting to him. The poems in *Green Sees Things in Waves* have a resistant cool, and with his goofy good-nature and hip diction Kleinzahler is the Nineties version of a poet who

5 *Going Fast*, by Frederick Seidel; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 103 pages, $22.

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hangs out on street corners in a beret and recites poems to passersby.[6]

> The sopressata fée outside of Calfasso's
> with the swept-back 'do and blood on her
> smock
> grabs a quick smoke on the sidewalk,
> tosses it in the gutter then sucks back her lips
> till they smack, getting her lipstick right.

Like *wow*, baby! This might be Norman Mailer imitating Norman Mailer, during his white Negro period. Kleinzahler is much taken with the power of the demotic, and when he says, "But still, it was a doozy," or "Oh shit,// there goes the Parcheesi board," it's hard not to smile and wonder what Frank O'Hara would have made of it. At times, I expect Kleinzahler to ask for a copy of *New World Writing* to see what the poets in Ghana are up to.

Kleinzahler has a way with landscape:

> The oleander on Longitude Lane
> flares among the languors and fevers of June
> below the south-facing piazzas
> the sea breezes find
> or don't quite find
> along the corridors of ivy-covered brick

Landscape is never quite enough, however. The fast-talking be-bop poet in Kleinzahler likes snappy titles ("Glossolalia All the Way to Buffalo") and impotent fragments (a series of "tankas" called, appallingly, "Tanka-Toys: A Memoir"). His "52 Pick-up" is a scattering of words and phrases that transiently suggest the nonsense ("Irwin Corey"), simulacra ("Frottage"), and brain damage ("Korsakoff's Syndrome") that are part of his technique—his linguistic markers are set as far apart as Chomsky's "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" and Durante's "Good night, Mrs. Calabash."

Every poet longs to make the language his own, and much of the strutting and fretting here is territorial display: Kleinzahler wants an idiom more adaptable than the one he's inherited, and he has plundered the language to advantage. I like a poet who can use "griseous" and "sintered" and "Sphygmology," as well as "pattymelt" and "higgledy-piggledy" and "Victor McLaglen." Unfortunately, as with much avant-garde poetry, these radical methods hide all-too-sentimental secrets. An idiom not yet fouled by the mawkishness of your ancestors is often willing victim to mawkishness of your very own. Too many of these poems descend into vacant longing, weepy regret for dead canaries, for lost chances, even—if I understand him—for pollution ("the aroma/ almost comforting by now, like food"). Daily life becomes all too much like religion, every dinner a main course of transcendence and a dessert of revelation:

> because only now, alone in this room
>
> dark and quiet as a chapel
> the garlic has slowly begun to bloom
>
> and the wine in the back of your throat
> will be made sonorous by it
>
> then it is time, after much stirring
> and some contemplation
>
> to find the appropriate tune
> perhaps one of Schubert's final sonatas

Poor Schubert. Here prose meets the death instinct.

I was more taken with Kleinzahler's previous book, *Red Sauce, Whiskey and Snow* (1995), where you had to put up with a lot of triviality to get two or three poems of subversive instinct. He seems to have decided triviality is enough. When he writes love poems, they come in the most peculiar diction imaginable, somewhere between Thomas Wyatt and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "How well these ladies do contrive, how well,/ to keep me in thrall with their sweet neglect." It's a joke, of course. A reader may be forgiven for looking at his watch.

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6 *Green Sees Things in Waves*, by August Kleinzahler; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 80 pages, $20.

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Books

An old gypsy nature

by Ben Downing

"If nobody writes to me I shall die," warned Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94) in an uncharacteristically overwrought letter to a friend in 1884. The threat wasn't quite idle, for the next day he almost did—not in a fit of epistolary loneliness, of course, but from a severe tubercular hemorrhage. And yet correspondence assumed for Stevenson, especially during the last years of his curtailed life, a singular importance. While this Scotsman's twenty-eight hundred letters hardly hold the record, I doubt that anyone has topped Stevenson for sheer relish of the medium. All the brisk élan of his novels and essays animates his letters, too. Better still, they make us acquainted, as nothing else can, with the complex, delightful, and—rarest of qualities—wholly *admirable* character that was R.L.S., as it pleased Stevenson to sign himself.

Thanks to the efforts of Ernest Mehew, it's now possible to get the full flavor of Stevenson's piquant letters in a single meaty volume.[1] Spanning the years from September 1868, when R.L.S. was seventeen, right up to a few days before his death in 1894, the 317 letters chosen by Mehew range across the broad spectrum of moods, from the goofball to the saturnine, in which Stevenson operated. No less diverse is the roster of his recipients: Stevenson's parents, cousin, oldest friends, and adored ex-nurse, Cummy, at the homier end of the list, and, at the more glamorous pole, a group of luminaries that includes Twain, Yeats, Rodin, Hardy, Henry James, J. M. Barrie, Edmund Gosse, George Meredith, George Saintsbury, John Addington Symonds, Arthur Conan Doyle, and William Dean Howells. For each correspondent, whether famous or obscure, Mehew provides a concise footnote explaining his or her relationship to R.L.S. Even more helpfully, his footnotes apprise us of the circumstances surrounding and prompting the letters: when, for example, Stevenson responds sharply to a given missive, Mehew quotes from it. Finally, Mehew interlards the text with brief biographical synopses. The results of his painstaking labors are to connect, at every step, the letters with the life, and to render appreciable that life's heft and irregular shape; I gained a keener sense of Stevenson from Mehew's annotations alone than from the one (admittedly poor) biography I've read.

Letters were crucial to R.L.S. for both emotional and utilitarian reasons. Warm, gregarious, unbudgeably loyal, he strove to maintain a cozy network of affections despite his long, frequent absences from those he loved—and letters were the only way. "Write to me in my infinite distance," he entreats a friend. In 1874, Stevenson accurately predicted to his mother that "I shall be a nomad . . . until my days be done." His

1 *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, edited by Ernest Mehew; Yale University Press, 626 pages, $39.95.

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letters are filled with a wry bafflement at the twists of his own fate. "Here is another curious start in my life," begins one; "I am living at an angora goat ranche . . . eighteen miles from Monterey."

If what Stevenson called his "old gipsy nature" spurred his vagrancy, illness was mostly to blame. First to European resorts like Menton, Hyères, and Davos, then to the South Pacific, his consumption kept him on the move. Nor was TB by any means his only ailment:

> My dear James, My bloody health has played me it in once more in the absurdest fashion, and the creature who now addresses you is but a stringy and white-faced *bouilli* out of the pot of fever: sub-acute rheumatism, whispers the doctor; the congested kidney, the genial pleuritic rub, the familiar recalcitrant liver, the aching constipated gall-duct, the swimming headache, and the devil to pay in every corner of the economy.

Stevenson was a connoisseur of disease, with a touch for wringing humor from the blackest facts. Like some perverse Escoffier, he once boasted of "a succession of gentle colds out of which I at last succeeded in cooking up a fine pleurisy." Self-mockery, not self-pity, was his preferred style.

But where R.L.S. could twit himself as a "wretched house-plant," he could also take satisfaction in his resilience; "I was made for a contest," he declared. Stevenson had (to steal Chesterton's choice phrase) "pugnacious optimism." For the reader, it's an odd sensation to overhear the author of *Treasure Island* buck up the one of *Peter Pan* about such decidedly adult, non-fantastic matters:

> No, Barrie, 'tis in vain that they try to alarm me with their bulletins. No doubt you're ill and unco ill . . . but I have been so often in the same case that I know pleurisy and pneumonia are in vain against Scotsmen who can write. You cannot imagine . . . how near me this common calamity brings you.

Stevenson's gift for mingling pain with comedy extended naturally to his own relationships. Here, for the benefit of James, he breathes fresh, droll life into the hoary commonplace that marriage is a battlefield:

> My wife is peepy and dowie: two Scotch expressions with which I will leave you to wrestle unaided. . . . She is a woman (as you know) not without art: the art of extracting the gloom of the eclipse from sunshine; and she has recently laboured in this field not without success. . . . It is strange: "we fell out my wife and I" the other night; she tackled me savagely for being a canary-bird; I replied (bleatingly) protesting that there was no use turning life into King Lear; presently it was discovered that there were two dead combatants upon the field, each slain by the arrow of the truth, and we tenderly carried off each other's corpses. Here is a little comedy for Henry James to write!

In 1911 Sidney Colvin, Stevenson's mentor, editor, and closest friend, asked for James's advice about whether to publish this letter. James replied that "Fanny S. will be a bigger fool than I ever took her for if she resents this lively description of their domestic broil. It helps to commemorate her and makes her interesting. . . ." Stevenson's occasional exasperation with Fanny never shades over into nastiness. In fact, he could get rather tetchy in her defense, as when, having taken Howells's *A Modern Instance* as a general assault on divorcées (which Fanny had once been), he frostily informed Howells that he wanted "to know no one who considers himself holier than my wife." Typically, R.L.S. later apologized to Howells for his pit-bull behavior; quick to decry sanctimoniousness in others, he wasn't about to pass over his own faults.

Stevenson's devotion to Fanny was matched by that to his friends. Even by Victorian standards, he worshiped friendship zealously and prided himself on practicing it well. "I did not ever care for much else than my friends," he writes to Charles Baxter, among the closest of them, and in

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an 1890 letter to Colvin his veneration is more fervent still:

> I did my work while I was a bedridden worm in England, and please God I shall do my work until I burst. I do not know of any other virtue I possess; and indeed there are few I prize alongside of it. Only, one other I have: I love my friends. . . . Since my dear wild noble father died, no head on earth, not even my wife's, is more precious to me than yours. I do not know if you know what I thought of him; I think of you, my honoured and beloved friend, equally and with a kindred spirit.

Such feelings were thoroughly requited. Gosse eulogized R.L.S. as the "most unselfish and the most lovable of human beings," while James, claims Leon Edel, "loved Stevenson with a tenderness of memory unique among his friends."

Mutual love notwithstanding, Stevenson did sometimes quarrel with his cronies. The worst rupture by far occurred between R.L.S and W. E. Henley, the prickly litterateur whose peg-leg Stevenson transplanted to Long John Silver. Once again, the igniting spark was Fanny, whom Henley had casually accused of plagiarism. Unlike in his spat with Howells, though, Stevenson didn't simmer down; he knew the insult had been meant. "I fear I have come to an end with Henley," he lamented to Baxter. It is a measure of the value Stevenson attached to friendship that, even two months after the break, his letters persist in agonizing over it: "This business has been my headstone; I will never be reconciled to life."

Familiar Studies of Men and Books R.L.S. named one of his volumes, a spirited collection of critical and biographical essays. The title is revealing, for Stevenson was wont to treat other writers, whether dead or alive, with the easy, sometimes teasing bonhomie of a kinsman. Even more unbuttoned is his manner toward them in correspondence, and one of the best reasons to read these letters is for Stevenson's salty, perceptive, often hilarious remarks on the competition.

Not surprisingly, his Scots affinities were strongest. Just as Rossetti thought himself Blake reincarnate, Stevenson quite literally believed, we discover here, that the eighteenth-century poet Robert Fergusson "lives in me"; "it really looks like transmigration of souls." But the Caledonian forebear Stevenson wrote most pungently about (to Gosse, in this case) was Burns:

> Talking of Burns, Robert . . . I made a kind of chronological table of his various loves and lusts, and have been comparatively speechless ever since. . . . There was something in him of the vulgar, bagmanlike, professional seducer. I could kick his bottom for it. . . . Oblige me by taking down and reading . . . his "Twa Dogs" and his "Address to the Unco' Guid." I am only a Scotchman after all, you see, and when I have beaten Burns I am driven at once, by my parental feelings, to console him with a sugar plum. But hang me, if I know anything I like so well as the "Twa Dogs." Even a common Englishman may have a glimpse, as it were from Pisgah, of its extraordinary merits.

When it came to continental writers, R.L.S. was less clannish yet every bit as decisive in his opinions. At rare moments, he bows down in awed supplication: "I have been reading the Vth and VIth *Aeneid* . . . and am overpowered. . . . We are all damned small fry, and Virgil is one of the tops of human achievement." At others, however, his censure is bitingly lucid:

> Were you to re-read some Balzac, as I have been doing, it would greatly help to clear your eyes. He was a man who never found his method. An inarticulate Shakespeare, smothered under forcible-feeble detail. It is astounding, to the riper mind, how bad he is, how feeble, how untrue, how tedious; and of course, when he surrendered to his temperament, how good and powerful. And yet never plain nor clear. He could not consent to be dull, and thus became so. He would leave nothing undeveloped, and thus drowned out of sight of land amid the multitude of crying and incongruous details. Jesus, there is but

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> one art: to omit! O if I knew how to omit, I would ask no other knowledge. A man who knew how to omit would make an *Iliad* of a daily paper.

That last deserves the immortality of aphorism.

Although Stevenson could be caustic about his peers—he conceived a special distaste for *Tess,* grousing to Colvin about "the false fire of Hardy"—his letters also prove him to have had a keen nose for talent. He was on to Shaw by 1886; in the same year, at Symonds's urging, he read *Crime and Punishment* in French, and raved that "Dostoieffsky is of course simply immense: it is not reading, it is having a brain fever. . . ." By 1890, he'd recognized Kipling's writing on the wall (the letter is to James):

> Well, we begin to be the old fogies now; and it was high time *something* rose to take our places. Certainly Kipling has the gifts; the fairy godmothers were all tipsy at his christening: what will he do with them?

Even at the height of his fame Stevenson eagerly sent fan mail. In 1894, the young Yeats received an out-of-the-blue letter informing him that R.L.S. had "fallen in slavery . . . to your poem called 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree.'" For his part, Twain got a mash note that began like this:

> My dear Mark Twain, I should have written a great while ago to the author of *Huckleberry Finn*—a book which I have read four times, and am quite ready to begin again tomorrow. I think you will like to hear this: I got *Huckleberry* when I was pretty ill . . . read it straight through, began at the beginning and read it straight through again without a break. Just at this juncture, down comes a Distinguished Painter [Sargent] to do my portrait; he was very refined and privately French; and when I insisted that *Huckleberry* was to be read aloud at the sittings, he *wilted,* sir. But I told him he had to face it, and he did, and I believe it did him good. I think he supposed I should have had Baudelaire read aloud to me.

Stevenson's irreverent, hard-headed approach to literature didn't stop at his own door. The least neurotic of writers, he assessed his work with the same candor and detachment he brought to bear on everyone else's. His story "The Beach of Falesá" he describes as "sixty thousand words of sterling domestic fiction"—which that crackling tale surely is. Penny dreadfuls, meanwhile, were frankly acknowledged as such: "As for *The Wrecker,* it's a machine, you know; don't expect aught else," he shrugged to James. Another book he savaged altogether:

> The present book, *Saint Ives,* is nothing—it is in no style in particular, a tissue of adventures, the central character not very well done, no philosophic pith under the yarn. . . .

This matter-of-fact tone predominates in Stevenson's accounts of his craft as well. He had scant patience for mincing niceties or prudishness: "If I have to kill a man, I kill him good; and if my characters have to go to bed with each other—well, I want them to go." Even when sizing up his life's achievement, two months before his death, R.L.S. would entertain no delusions: "It was a very little dose of inspiration, and a pretty little trick of style . . . improved by the most heroic industry." As befits a Scots writer sometimes accused of Gallic preening, his vanities were hard work and elegant prose.

Stevenson's letters are blunt, finally, about his motives: "I do not write for the public; I do write for money, a nobler deity." Yet his disregard for the ruck of readers excepted those like the four Montagnon children, who wrote to plead for a sequel to *Kidnapped.* They heard back from R.L.S. within a week:

> Thank you for your very pleasant letter. I have every intention to start Alan and David once again on their adventures; but what you have heard is true, I am often ill and unfit to work; Alan, besides, and David too, have views of their own and sometimes sulk. . . .

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And practical though he may have been, Stevenson was no Stephen King. From New York, he wrote the following to Colvin:

> You have no idea how much is made of me here; I was offered £2000 for a weekly article —eh hé, how is that, but I refused that lucrative job. They would drive even an honest man into being a mere lucre-hunter in three weeks. . . .

He kept one eye on his boiling pot, the other on the icy pinnacles of art.

The classic R.L.S. letter was a gallimaufry of news, business, medical updates, ruminations, badinage, solicitudes, some frisky light verses, bits of Horace or Montaigne peppered in, a doodle or two, and, dangling from it all, a coda of postscripts. These, for instance, he appended to a letter to a book-illustrator:

> My mother (a good judge) says this is obscure and affected. What I mean is, couldn't you get that frontispiece sooner? R.L.S.
>
> My mother says this last is impolite: couldn't you as *a favour* get the frontispiece sooner? R.L.S.

Countless such moments of whimsicality, even outright silliness, are to be found and snickered over here. "I begin to see the whole scheme of letter writing," Stevenson mused in 1890; "you sit down every day and pour out an equable stream of twaddle." Perhaps, but Stevenson's twaddle makes better reading than most people's profundities. In the 1880s, for example, he and Baxter concocted a mock correspondence between "Thomson" and "Johnson," Scots characters of their larkish invention. The following passage is representative:

> Thomson, what did I tell ye? What did I hammer in the lugs of ye? . . . Of coorse, it's a sair affliction to see a man that I hae been ower muckle mixed up wi—no to say, identifeed—come to sic hōrrible example; but still and on, it's a consolation to ken that, whatever, I dinnae ken the disgrace o' a gaol, airns, an cōmmon malefactors. Be damd, you're in it noo! A bony exhibeetion. O Thomson, and me that has aye befreendit ye!

The Thomson-Johnson game was played in the tradition of "Jink," the name given by R.L.S. and his cousin Bob to their adolescent practical joking. Stevenson once wrote that Pepys "preserved till nearly forty the headlong gusto of a boy"; his own endured till his death at forty-four.

It's virtually impossible to talk about Stevenson for long without running into the fact—and the attendant "issue"—of his boyishness. A coddled only child who married a woman ten years his senior and never reproduced, R.L.S. routinely acknowledged his own juvenility. His last letters, haunted by a prescience of death, contain descriptions of himself as a "bewildered child" and, "to borrow Carlyle on De Quincey, [a] 'Child that has been in hell.'" "I was not born for age," he concludes, with Keatsian resonance.

In fact, Stevenson's very status hinges largely on his puerile appeal. Aptly enough, he's acquired a sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde double reputation: as clever yet flyweight raconteur to kids and middlebrows, a downmarket Conrad, and as writer's writer; among those taking the latter view have been (besides James et al.) Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Borges, and Graham Greene—wise judges all. Stevenson's knacks for narrative, suspense, and the turning of shapely sentences are undeniable. What tends to divide his readers is the question of his "seriousness," especially moral. My amateur opinion is that while Stevenson's fast pace may preclude, say, George Eliot's hand-wringing botherations, the problem of how to act is persistent in his work. Even callow characters like Jim Hawkins and David Balfour are forced to make swift, difficult decisions about loyalty and the right thing to do, and no one who

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reads *The Weir of Hermiston* can mistake its author for anything less than a seasoned observer of moral conflict, dilemma, and ambiguity.

On this whole disputed terrain Stevenson's letters shed a clarifying light. For they show him to have combined, in his relationships, the best qualities of child and adult. Imaginative, impish, spontaneous, and open, R.L.S. was also fastidiously ethical and stalwart when it counted most; he confessed to Barrie a "sneaking love . . . for a rogue," yet was never one himself. Ironically, the inveterate mama's boy ended up bread-winning for Fanny and her brood (which included Joe Strong, her worthlesss sponge of a son-in-law). As "the head of a household of five whites, and of twelve Samoans" when living in the South Seas, Stevenson with bovine resignation assumed "the one eternal burthen to go on making an income for my family. . . . The jingling tingling damned mint sauce is the trouble always." Nor did he neglect wider responsibilities, embroiling himself, at considerable risk, in the Samoan struggle with Germany: "I do loathe politics; but at the same time, I cannot stand by and have the natives blown in the air treacherously with dynamite." Explosives and perfidy belonged to the hot world Stevenson found himself in, and to the swashbuckling one he conjured through his fiction. But within the intimate domain of his letters, life was far more often honest, genial, civilized.

The real Greenberg

Florence Rubenfeld Clement Greenberg: A Life. Scribner, 336 pages, $30

reviewed by Karen Wilkin

In the interest of full disclosure, I should say at once that I am not an impartial reviewer of Florence Rubenfeld's recent *Clement Greenberg: A Life*, since I knew Clement Greenberg for the last twenty years or so of his life. I stopped talking to him four or five years before he died, but that's not the issue. I continue to admire Greenberg's writing enormously. I learned a great deal from him, and I would not have become the critic I am without his example. I feel fortunate to have been with him on numerous visits to artists' studios and to museums and galleries, during the many years when we were still on speaking terms. Whatever quarrels I had with the man—and they were substantial, well-founded, and often bitter—they were and remain private matters. They had nothing to do with Greenberg's work and it is by his work that he deserves to be judged. He remains unquestionably one of the giants of twentieth-century art criticism.

Since the publication of four volumes of his collected critical writings from 1939 through 1969 (University of Chicago Press, 1986–93), intelligently edited by John O'Brian, it has been possible to read the essays, watch Greenberg educating himself in public, see him being led by his eye (sometimes unwillingly), and follow him as he used his extensive experience of looking to map the trajectory of recent art, from the advent of modernism to post-war abstraction. A fifth volume of unpublished material is promised, and, once we have that, the complete Greenberg will be available to anyone interested in what he had to say. (His letters and other papers are already available to scholars.)

The published material ranges from the brilliant, hyperbolic essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," which announced Greenberg as a voice to be reckoned with in 1939, to an illuminating rumination on the art of the 1960s, delivered as a lecture thirty years later. We can track his early Marxist allegiance in his positing of an internal dialectic that fuels developments in the visual arts. We can note his Trotskyist assumption that excellence and authenticity are inextricably connected, acknowledge his belief that high and low culture are widely separated, and above all, follow his efforts to distinguish the good from the less good, in a tireless pursuit of that now maligned term

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"quality." Whether or not we accept Greenberg's construction of the development of modernism as a full recounting of the story, whether or not we share his enthusiasms and prejudices, no one who cares about modern culture can ignore his densely reasoned arguments and often dazzlingly insightful observations. Whether or not we are wholly convinced by his conclusions, Greenberg's articulation of his experience and his abstraction of that experience into a coherent overview are always stimulating and provocative, usually enlightening, and often persuasive. Moreover—something increasingly rare in a discipline riddled with academic jargon and clumsy coinages—Greenberg's critical formulations are expressed in finely honed, tightly packed prose.

What Greenberg was like as a human being may be of deep concern to his friends and family, but it's hard to believe that it had much to do with his achievement as a critic. What he read, what he looked at, who and what influenced him—yes—but not necessarily how he behaved. That he could be belligerent, difficult, and argumentative, as well as perceptive, disarmingly intelligent, brutally honest, and—especially in the studio—both pitiless and unexpectedly sensitive, is not news, nor does it tell us much about his contribution to intellectual life in twentieth-century America. I'm not convinced that knowing that Greenberg drank too much and smoked unfiltered Camels helps us understand his description of modernism as a process of self-criticism in which each discipline jettisoned everything not intrinsic to its medium. Does knowing that Greenberg liked to dance or that he liked using his fists when provoked alter our appreciation for his trenchant, prescient observations on the early work of Jackson Pollock and David Smith? (I admit that when I first discovered that the crusty Clem was an admirer of the Beach Boys, it made me reconsider his attitude toward popular culture.)

Since we live in an era when personality commands more attention than whatever that personality might produce, it's probably inevitable that a biography of Greenberg should have appeared before that long-awaited final volume of his critical writings. And since we live in an era when hearsay and gossip cobbled together with generalizations drawn from secondary sources pass for carefully researched biography—what a colleague refers to as the "supermarket checkout counter school of research"—it is also probably inevitable that Florence Rubenfeld's biography should be, to put it delicately, extremely problematic.

In her introduction, Rubenfeld declares that two books would be required to deal adequately with Greenberg. "First," she writes, "an intellectual biography that traced his ideas and laid the groundwork for a reexamination of his important critical contribution. Second, a social biography that explored his career within the context of his life and times. It would examine the emotional and intellectual forces that shaped his character, personality, and intellect, the values he held dear, the animosity he provoked, and his own goals and aspirations." Just how you exclude intellectual biographical issues from a book about a man whose career—and whose importance—was completely bound up with ideas is a challenging notion, but Rubenfeld claims that her book is of the second kind she describes.

In one respect, she has succeeded. Greenberg's voice can be heard, and the portrait that emerges is not wholly inaccurate. That is to say, close friends recognize the character quirks and behavior Rubenfeld describes. (Greenberg's younger brother acknowledges that the man depicted corresponds to "Clem as I knew him.") The trouble is that Rubenfeld is not only more interested in "the animosity [Greenberg] provoked" than in his critical achievement, but she is also far more eager to discuss what she calls "the emotional forces" that shaped his "character, personality, and intellect" than anything else. She gives more weight to personal foibles than to intellec-

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tual contributions and turns infrequent or unique actions into illustrations of habitual attitudes. She ascribes motives and offers pop-psychology explanations for complicated responses—the death of Greenberg's mother when he was sixteen, for example, is construed as "abandonment" and used to explain most of his subsequent relations with women. Rubenfeld makes much of Greenberg's rejection of his father's materialistic values and his "reinvention" of himself as an intellectual, as though this were something remarkable and faintly distasteful, rather than being common among Greenberg's generation of intelligent American-born children of immigrants.

The book would have benefited immeasurably from thorough fact-checking. It is just plain sloppy. Some of the bound galleys' more egregious misspellings and misidentifications have been corrected in the published volume, but a great many irritating, avoidable gaffes persist. Rubenfeld still gets many easily verified facts wrong, mixes up sequences, and misspells names. Perhaps she relied too heavily on Greenberg's recollection of events that were sometimes forty years in the past by the time she interviewed him, or took too literally the private shorthand with which he made barebones records of daily activities and encounters in his "diaries" (appointment books, not journals). She continually uses nicknames—Greenberg is "Clem" throughout—a stylistic choice, I suppose, intended to suggest intimacy, but it rankles. Sometimes the result is ludicrous: "Mike" Fried, as Rubenfeld calls him, is generally known as Michael, even to his intimates.

What's far more important, Rubenfeld's art history is full of holes, which leads her to make silly generalizations and wreak havoc with dates and sequences. "Clem entered the discussion of abstraction in New York soon after it got under way," she states, a curious assertion about someone who was four at the time of the 1913 Armory Show and who didn't publish his first essay on modern art until 1939. (Rubenfeld's grasp of dates seems tenuous throughout; she cites James Dean as an exemplar of male behavior for hip Americans in the 1940s.)

The book is laced with small but nasty errors. Greenberg's Litvak grandfather is described as having been a "moneylender" in the old country: a "*pächter*." Rubenfeld is apparently unaware that the word means "tenant" or "leaseholder." (Jews in Polish Lithuania, since they were forbidden to own land, paid rent on a lease made out in some peasant's name.) David Smith, she notes, learned to weld in the Brooklyn ironworks whose name he appropriated for his studio, when it was having already acquired those skills in a Studebaker factory that allowed Smith to make the first constructed metal sculptures in America after seeing photographs of Picasso's and González's pioneering efforts. Stuart Davis is listed as having been a member of American Abstract Artists, a group whose aesthetic principles ran counter to everything he believed essential to the making of significant art and whose geometry-based "non-objective" efforts he loathed. And so on. Almost every page yields something in this vein, none of it important in itself, except that each small inaccuracy is emblematic of the author's casual approach to facts throughout the book; cumulatively, they cast doubt on Rubenfeld's more significant assertions.

And doubt we should. The book is based on what we are told were extensive interviews with people who knew Greenberg. Many who were close to him, however, declined to participate or to speak about personal matters. Still others say they were never approached. Rubenfeld never interviewed William Phillips, for example, an invaluable source of information, as a charter member of the New York Intellectuals (to whom she devotes a chapter) and a founding editor of *Partisan Review*. Phillips was not only the first champion of Greenberg's art criticism, but one of his closest friends during his early years as a critic. Some of us, interviewed ten years ago when Rubenfeld began her project, were startled to find blatant misquotations, misattributions, and

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seriously warped interpretations of what we had said. (Just for the record, the term "Clemette" does not refer to what Rubenfeld claims to have been Greenberg's "prodigious" womanizing—in the 1970s and 1980s!—but to the numerous female painters, encouraged by his attention to their work, who formed a corps of true believers.)

Many of Rubenfeld's sources are plainly angry with Greenberg and have seized the opportunity to redress real or perceived wrongs, unburdening themselves of resentments harbored for years. The book relies heavily on implication, on hearsay of the "everyone knows" variety, with the tacit assumption that anyone who has anything scandalous or truly discrediting to report must be unbiased and should be given a far more ample hearing than a sympathetic or neutral commentator. It's an insidious methodology. Implicit in it, for example, is Rubenfeld's belief that Greenberg was motivated by a desire for power rather than by passionate enthusiasm for the art he espoused, though she doesn't say so. She simply quotes people who think that it's true, rarely noting whether or not they are credible witnesses.

Greenberg provoked, even courted, hostility. He enraged some people, left others feeling scarred. Speaking in public, he would make sweeping generalizations about works of art, entire movements, or whole centuries, and then truculently refuse to explain his reasoning. It wasn't pure perverseness or arrogance, but simply a demonstration of what he believed the critic's task to be: to look voraciously, to experience art directly and intensely, and then, as he once wrote, "to draw the conclusions from his vast experience of art and shape them into a coherent intellectual structure"—that is, "to approach art philosophically," which Greenberg defined as "to abstract from one's experience of it." To know this, you'd have to have read his 1955 essay on Bernard Berenson, and absent that information Greenberg's criticism is often thought to be overbearing.

Greenberg's assured, authoritative spoken or written voice (which always omitted the obvious phrase "in my opinion") was frequently interpreted as dogmatic, and his descriptions—abstracted from his experience—were seen as prescriptions. (Few people seem to have noted his willingness to change his mind, publicly as well as privately, to say "I was wrong about that.") Hence the accusations of his "telling artists what to do," always made, it should be noted, by people whose work didn't interest him, and of altering artists' work after their death. Hence, too, the acrimonious assertions that Greenberg used his influence and authority to make stars of artists who followed his directives and then benefited financially from their success.

Many of these accusations became *causes célèbres* in the art world: how Greenberg, a trustee of the estate of his close friend David Smith, authorized removal of white paint from some of Smith's late works and failed to protect other painted works from deterioration. How, in the case of Morris Louis, he arbitrarily decided the dimensions of the paintings left unstretched and unmarked—and therefore, unexhibitable—when Louis died. Greenberg did this at the request of the artist's widow and her advisors, so that the pictures could be sold. And then there are the apparently unquashable rumors of Greenberg's being paid fabulous sums of money by dealers who enriched themselves by selling the art he supported. These are not trivial issues, but, rather, they are bound up with the whole question of Greenberg's reputation and with the perceptions of the strength (or the waning) of his influence at various moments in his career. Such matters certainly warrant the attention Rubenfeld accords them.

To her credit, Rubenfeld is even-handed and sensible in recounting the Smith affair, presenting various perspectives fairly and thoughtfully. She is less scrupulous, however, in her discussion of the Louis saga, even though there is ample factual material

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available about the number of stretched, marked, and unmarked works actually left in the studio after the painter's death, and she resorts to pure innuendo in addressing the question of Greenberg's relationship with André Emmerich Gallery. Although she says that both Greenberg and Emmerich stated "that there was no financial arrangement between them" and quotes Emmerich as saying "Clem Greenberg never received any compensation from me," Rubenfeld also makes a point of stressing "the belief from those outside Clem's circle that Clem was in it for the money." She cites Rosalind Krauss's remark that "she could not prove it but believed it was true" and Dore Ashton's declaration that "he was getting a sizable retainer from André Emmerich. I also think—we all did—that he was getting a commission on every painting, by one of his painters, sold anywhere in the world." (See what I mean about Rubenfeld's methodology?)

By contrast, there are reasonable, thoughtful comments by William Rubin, the former head of the Department of Painting and Sculpture of the Museum of Modern Art, about Greenberg's contribution and his relationship with the artists close to him; by the art historian Michael Fried on his own formative years as a critic, before he separated himself from the Greenberg inner circle; and by the sculptor James Wolfe about Greenberg's demeanor in the studio. Wolfe's observations give a sense of how valued and stimulating a presence Greenberg could be: "His comments were more than useful. They were an education. Clem was superb. He had a superb eye and he really cared about art. He might be brutally frank, but it was okay because he was basically sympathetic. Art was his whole life, you see. He was the only one I ever knew with that kind of voracious appetite for it."

Wolfe offers a welcome corrective to Krauss's statement that Greenberg "believed in the idea of studio criticism, where a critic spends time in an artist's studio, *while the artist is at work*, and makes suggestions" (italics mine). The idea that anyone would coach an artist at work is preposterous—which I am sure Krauss knows perfectly well—and Wolfe makes it clear that what Greenberg did was comment on provisionally finished works or works in progress, presented for his response. What kind of comments? "He'd come in and focus on aspects of a sculpture—what he thought was right or wrong, or what might be too much . . . or not enough. . . . But it was always your sculpture. You could take things out and put them back in. You could try what he said. You didn't lose anything . . . there was a dialogue."

Dialogue is the operative word. Rubenfeld never suggests how reciprocal Greenberg's studio experience was. For the artists with whom he is most closely identified—Pollock, Smith, Frankenthaler, Noland, Louis, Olitski, Caro, and Poons, among others—Greenberg was a welcome, provocative, energizing presence in the studio, an informed, penetrating eye whose responses could help to resolve difficulties or provide reassurance in venturing into frightening new territory. But Greenberg himself thrived on encounters with works of art. Well into his eighties, despite his insistence that "life is more important than art," his appetite for looking was insatiable, and he was always eager to visit studios of artists, celebrated or unknown, young or old, wherever he was. We'd never know this from *Clement Greenberg: A Life*, which barely touches on his last years (except to suggest erroneously that he was addicted to hard drugs), but until the very end he seemed revitalized by looking at art. Like Roger Fry, he had a vivid sense of works of art as physical, *made* objects with imperatives of their own. Greenberg's controversial formalist approach is largely a nuts-and-bolts, *maker*'s approach, informed by studio talk, the kind of practical discussion of what works and what doesn't that is familiar to anyone who has spent time with practicing painters or sculptors. Greenberg frequently acknowledged how much he owed to Hans Hofmann's ideas, which he

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first encountered in the lectures the painter delivered in 1938 and 1939.

Which brings me to Rubenfeld's discussion of influences on Greenberg's criticism, included presumably under the heading of the "intellectual forces that shaped his character, personality, and intellect." Quite simply, she doesn't seem up to the task. It is impossible to write about formative precedents for Greenberg's approach without taking into account Immanuel Kant, Julius Meier-Graefe, and Roger Fry. To oversimplify, even though Greenberg never shared Kant's faith in the transcendent, universal qualities of value judgments, Kant's insistence on the priority of formal issues in aesthetic judgments of taste was fundamental to Greenberg's construction of what he called his "home-made aesthetics." So was Meier-Graefe's exhaustive, firsthand scrutiny of works of art as the basis upon which to form opinions of worth. And so was Fry's passionate attention to the verifiable, visible formal manifestations of the artist's intent.

Rubenfeld does not probe deeply—if at all—into these connections; neither does she explore Greenberg's debt to Hofmann, which is dealt with in a couple of sentences and (wrongly) connected solely to a reading of Cubism. She does, however, attempt a lengthy comparison of Greenberg and T. S. Eliot. That Greenberg admired and learned greatly from Eliot's criticism is obvious, despite the equally obvious differences in their prose, among other things. (I remember Greenberg once showing me his heavily underlined and annotated copy of a collection of Eliot's critical essays.) There are clear connections between the ideas about the poet's relationship to the past in Eliot's seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and Greenberg's notion of modernism as a holding action for the continuation of past excellences, rather than as a rejection of tradition. But Rubenfeld's equation of the two men is unconvincing and rather sophomoric. She maintains, for example, that, while Eliot created a language with which to write about modern literature and identified the standards by which it could be judged, no one had yet done this for modern painting and sculpture when Greenberg first began to write. This notion is impossible to sustain for anyone who has read Fry or Meier-Graefe or the published statements of many of the modernist artists whom Greenberg most admired—or Diderot on Chardin, if it comes to that. Rubenfeld fails to make the more convincing point, made by William Phillips, that part of Greenberg's strength as an art critic came from his background in literary criticism—which is not to discount the paramount importance of his eye. "Greenberg," Phillips has said recently, "brought a breadth of experience and references to what he looked at—like a literary critic."

Rubenfeld also runs into trouble when she addresses the world of the New York Intellectuals and when she tackles the early days of *Partisan Review*—which published "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and then gave Greenberg his start as an art critic. As she does elsewhere in the book, Rubenfeld reprises questionable anecdotes, stringing them together with explanations that are often impenetrably confusing. A quick look at the footnotes goes a long way to explaining the problem. Although elsewhere she has made use of her interviews (still no guarantee of accuracy), in these chapters Rubenfeld has relied almost entirely on secondary sources rather than on original research. Once we are alerted to this, it becomes obvious that there's less firsthand material in the foundations of *Clement Greenberg: A Life* than we might have hoped. Rubenfeld seems to have ignored Greenberg's letters entirely. Much of her material on Pollock comes from a sensationalized interview-based biography of the artist published a few years ago, while her principal source for the section on Eliot appears to be Terry Eagleton's book on literary theory. Greenberg deserves better. Read the four volumes of his writings in preference to Rubenfeld. They provide a much better picture of the critic in action, and the prose is vastly better.

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A vibrant Teutonic strain

Frederic J. Schwartz The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture Before the First World War. Yale University Press, 262 pages, $55

reviewed by J. Duncan Berry

Erwin Panofsky's memoirs on "Three Decades of Art History in the United States" contain a story of how Walter Cook, then director of New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, described the process by which the NYU art-history faculty suddenly became the most prestigious in the world: Hitler "shakes the tree and I collect the apples." When one considers the equally impressive displacement of German artists and architects, including Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius—who managed to effect a sea change in American architectural education by the mid-1950s—it becomes evident that the American experience with the visual arts since the early-1930s contains a rich and vibrant Teutonic strain. Needless to say, most intellectuals concerned with the arts today would be loathe to explore the consequences of this historical fact.

Over the course of the last two decades I have become increasingly fascinated by the similarity of the American dilemma with so-called postmodernism and the German dilemma with modernism before the advent of Hitler. My fascination never evolved into a systematic investigation partly because I suspected that the American dilemma, though reflecting Germanic sensibilities and concerns, exhibits nowhere near the conceptual sophistication, visual nuance, and critical subtlety of the German experience. The book under review has convinced me of many things, the first of which is that my initial suspicion was right: the German debate on the advance of the visual arts in the early years of this century was far more compelling, engaging, and, in the final analysis, more important than our current concerns. The prime reason for this is the ubiquity of the political in today's discourse on the fine arts, a corrosive and degrading aspect of our culture that distorts and diminishes everything it touches.

Frederic J. Schwartz, lecturer in art history at University College, London, has targeted the German debate on artistic value sponsored by the German Werkbund in the decade preceding the First World War. To appreciate fully the magnitude of this author's achievement, it must be understood that Imperial Germany possessed an expansive, if loosely woven, cultural apparatus dedicated to the visual arts, ranging from the world's most highly developed university system to a broad array of academies, ateliers, and museums; each constellation articulated its values and interests in a cluster of periodicals. Overlaps were common, and, as it is now, the fine arts constituted a small world. Unlike virtually any previous epoch, the historian of this period faces a daunting task in digesting the sheer bulk of the published primary sources alone. By completely mastering a bibliography of this complexity and size, Schwartz far surpasses any single author in presenting a comprehensive picture of the theoretical dimension of the Werkbund's activities, an astonishing feat in and of itself.

But beyond simply mastering a reading list, the author has composed a book that I consider easily the most thought-provoking book I have read in a year. Imagine the following subject, treated with enviable finesse and genuine insight, as simply one part of a far larger enterprise: the impact of intellectual property law between 1906 and 1916 on the discussion of appropriate forms for mass-produced consumer goods. The author's stated intention is to explain why "the artists and thinkers of the time sought to understand relations of 'form' to 'economy.'" In allowing the original terms of the debate to be fleshed out and retroactively explored in the neighboring disciplines, Schwartz ambitiously and successfully charts a period of fascinating transition into a world where formal abstraction was, if not entirely desirable, then at least fully conceivable. Because we live in a world in

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which the debate between abstraction and representation is still alive, and because we often express ourselves in the semantic and conceptual garb of Imperial Germany, this book is vitally important for any advanced thinking on today's topics in the visual arts. Our indigenous *Kulturkritik* would be significantly enriched if we understood the trajectory of related previous episodes.

Of greatest interest for me is the way Schwartz explains the imprint of German sociology and the Historical School of political economy on the debate. Tönnies, Simmel, and Sombart are presented with a clarity that would probably enlighten most practicing social scientists. Perhaps it requires someone who can still believe that capitalism is a cultural construct to fully articulate the romantic anticapitalism of the German academic mandarinate circa 1910. Thus, the epilogue's directionless discussion of the Frankfurt School and the periodic lapse into a kind of solipsistic jargon that only a semiotician can create (or understand) are the only weaknesses that concern me. I would also have appreciated a sidelight cast on the difference between German and Austrian views; here there are very significant differences to be noted, both philosophically and aesthetically. All told, this book enables us to skip a generation in our understanding of the Werkbund and, if read with an eye to the current arts scene, offers exciting perspectives on today's debates—although I suspect that the author would be ideologically disposed to condemn the most important of these perspectives. Apples don't fall far from the tree.

Bad marriages

Maeve Brennan *The Springs of Affection: Stories of Dublin*. Houghton Mifflin, 358 pages, $24

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Marriage is one of life's great mysteries. What makes a marriage work? What makes it fail? Why do certain couples simply come apart, while others, however patently incompatible, continue to exist together in a twilit half-life, joined by some invisible and unbreakable bond? Marriage is a bargain; a poor bargain for all too many.

Tolstoy's famous claim that all happy families are alike has been disproved time and again—there are many, many ways of being happy, or at least contented—but his corresponding dictum that each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way is unarguable: the unhappy marriage, in particular, has always been a staple of literature. David and Dora Copperfield, Molly and Leopold Bloom, Charles and Emma Bovary, Jason and Medea, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Dorothea and Edward Casaubon, Swann and Odette, Anna and Alexei Karenin, Hester Prynne and Roger Chillingworth, Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond, Nora and Torvald Helmer, Jude and Sue Fawley, Humbert Humbert and Charlotte Haze: there are almost as many, and as various, ways of being unhappily married in literature as there are in life. Every so often we encounter some middle-aged or elderly couple who appears so grotesquely ill-suited that our only response is to wonder how on earth they could have come together. Life seldom offers us an explanation; good fiction does.

The Irish-born short-story writer Maeve Brennan left a very slim output of work upon her death in 1993, but among her stories are six that, taken together, comprise a superb and harrowing portrait of a truly miserable marriage. Along with her other best stories, they have recently been published together as *The Springs of Affection*, with an introduction by her *New Yorker* colleague and editor William Maxwell, himself a fiction writer whose close attention to domestic detail and low-key, implied tragedy is not at all unlike Brennan's. But Maxwell is a kinder writer than Brennan: his subject is the sadness inherent in love, or thwarted love, and he lacks, for better or worse, Brennan's sharp and even cruel touch.

Maeve Brennan was born in 1916, three months before the Easter Rebellion, and

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spent her first seventeen years in the Ranelagh neighborhood of Dublin, in a small brick house which, Maxwell rightly points out, "is her imagination's home": all three of the central families in *The Springs of Affection* reside in exactly such a house, always located on a dead-end street and looking out, in the rear, on a garage and a tennis club.

In 1934 Maeve Brennan's father was appointed the Republic of Ireland's first envoy to the United States, and the family moved to Washington, where Maeve enrolled in Georgetown University. When Robert Brennan's term ended, he returned with the rest of the family to Dublin, but Maeve elected to stay in America permanently. She settled in New York and was hired as a staff writer by William Shawn at *The New Yorker*; over a period of fifteen years her observations of New York City, "communications from our friend the long-winded lady," appeared in "Talk of the Town." She also wrote a number of short stories, most of which first appeared in the magazine. They were subsequently published in two collections, *In and Out of Never-Never Land* (1969) and *Christmas Eve* (1974). Houghton Mifflin has assembled the best of these in *The Springs of Affection*.

Brennan's own experiment in married life lasted only five years. In 1954 she become the fourth wife of St. Clair McKelway, a once-glamorous *New Yorker* writer and editor who had, by that time, begun his descent into alcoholism and manic-depression. "The couple drank martinis and lived beyond their means," as Mary Hawthorne recently observed in *The London Review of Books*, "and the magazine looked after them."

After the marriage broke up in 1959, Brennan began work on her best stories, a cycle about a Dublin couple named Hubert and Rose Derdon. She had written one story about them, "The Poor Men and Women," in 1952; now she began in earnest to chronicle their history.

Rose Derdon's father had died two days before her tenth birthday, and this unexpected death stunted her in some fundamental way. She had adored her father; to her he represented generosity, imagination, and love itself. Together they

> had looked forward to her tenth birthday. They had both been so busy thinking of the Big Day, and talking about it, that they had paid no attention at all to the days that went before it, except to cross them off the calendar with a pencil. The father had drawn a bright red star around the Big Day, but he had paid no attention at all to the days that went before it, and neither had she, except that they were both glad, every evening, that another day could be crossed off to show them that they were that much nearer to the day they were both looking forward to. All the days before her birthday had been ordinary days, dull workaday days, not to be valued but only to be pushed out of the way, and then one of the ordinary days had turned around and made itself into the most important day of all.

The pervasive sense of waste in this passage presages the entire pattern of Rose's subsequent life. She will grow up into a pretty, winsome girl, later a superficially capable woman, but emotionally she never moves beyond the small child bewildered by her father's loss. By the time she is in her fifties—the period in which these stories are largely set—she has turned into an unattractive and inconsequential person whose face habitually "wore a self-conscious, almost disdainful look, the look of one who has found nothing to criticize so far but who fears that at any moment she might find herself among people who are beneath her and who will try to be too familiar with her": the antithesis of what her beloved father would have hoped for her.

She annoys her husband Hubert, far more intelligent than she, almost beyond endurance. "Her pretensions, the pitiful air she wore of being a certain sort of person, irritated him so much that he could hardly bear to look at her on the rare occasions—rare these days, anyway—when they went out together." Something went wrong in

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the very early days of their marriage: some vital opportunity was missed, some crucial moment allowed to pass unrecognized. From that moment Rose began her lifelong withdrawal from her husband. "Rose was afraid of him, and she never made any attempt to control the fear, no matter what he said to her. . . . That was what defeated him at every turn, and that is why he gradually, or finally—he could not have told how it happened—gave up any attempt to get on any kind of terms with her." Hubert is very far from being a violent man, and Brennan, like the first-rate writer she is, leaves ambiguous the question of whether Rose's fear is real or feigned. In my opinion, it is feigned: the putative fear provides Rose with an excuse from communicating with her husband on his own level, from behaving as an adult with another adult, an equal. Rose will not grow up.

The Derdons have a single child, John, and they have ruined him. From John's earliest childhood Rose smothered him with love, a love from which she energetically sought to exclude Hubert, and the innocent child went along with her agenda. "This knowledge, that Hubert *knew no better*, formed the foundation and framework of the conspiracy between them that made their days so interesting and that gave a warm start to most of their conversations. They were always talking about Hubert." In the initial estrangement between father and son, Rose was without any doubt at fault, but, in writing the boy off too soon, Hubert also sinned.

Now in his twenties, John has disappeared into the priesthood, thus escaping the marital impasse at home and the possibility of repeating it. Neither parent is happy about his vocation, but Hubert at least is resigned. "John was a poor example of a fellow, weak and timid and with no aptitude for anything and no inclination toward anything. . . . For a fellow like that, becoming a priest was as good an answer as any." Brennan's characters have a marvelous tendency to voice their ironies quite unconsciously.

Rose is an infuriatingly stupid woman; Hubert has intelligence but lacks wisdom. Their life together is a prison and a waste, a fact that Hubert comprehends but cannot change. He comprehends, too, that their plight is not unique. Listening to the neighbors one evening, he hears

> the quarrelsome old woman next door scolding her middle-aged daughter, who was unmarried and lived at home, doing the housework and cooking and easing her occasional rebellious rages with loud crying fits. . . . and he heard the Donovans' big collie crying pitifully as it strained at the chain that held it to the cramped kennel that had been its home from a puppy. . . . He heard more than he could bear to hear.

After Rose's death, Hubert torments himself with his inability to mourn or even to exult. Examining the flimsy items she has jealously hoarded in boxes—old bills and recipes and bits of fabric—he is overcome by the futility of it all. "The contents of the chocolate boxes revealed a mind given over entirely to trivialities and makeshift, always makeshift, making do, making last, putting to use somehow, wasting nothing except her time and her life and his time and his life."

Even as the Derdon series was underway, Brennan began writing another group of stories about a second couple, Delia and Martin Bagot. Here is another troubled marriage, although it would be hard to characterize it as entirely unhappy. The Bagots are younger, more attractive, somewhat better off than the Derdons. Their first child, a boy, died before he was a week old, and Delia's grief was so intense as to send her almost mad. Now life is, at least on the surface, back to normal and they have two small girls. Martin, however, is emotionally distanced from the family; he has taken to sleeping in the spare room for a reason that neither he nor Delia fully understands. Delia and Martin are friendly, and not unaffectionate, but there is no real communication between them.

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These are fine stories, but as a group not quite on the level of the Derdon ones, largely because of their emotional diffuseness. There is never any definitive moment between Delia and Martin, never any way for the reader to know, or even to intuit, the reason for their fundamental separateness. The focus is primarily upon Delia, as she goes dreamily about her unremarkable quotidian round. A nervous, well-meaning woman of rather limited intelligence, Delia Bagot bears more than a passing resemblance to Evan S. Connell's great character Mrs. Bridge, and like Mrs. Bridge she is oddly affecting for reasons that are hard to understand. As Maxwell observes, Brennan possessed "the ability to suggest something devastating while seeming to be making an innocuous statement."

Two stories in the series stand out far above the rest. The first is the beautiful "Stories of Africa," in which a moribund bishop, a friend of Delia's dead father, pays her a visit. As she listens to the kind old man reminisce about the beloved farm where she grew up, Delia somehow regains a sense of self, and of wholeness. The final story, "Springs of Affection," is a small masterpiece. Here Delia and Martin are dead, and Martin's twin sister Min, a bitter old woman, presides over their belongings and wears Martin's wedding ring on her own finger: "She, standing alone as always, had lived to sum them all up." As Min recalls the family's life, particularly her childhood with Martin, we see the way his family's heritage of loneliness, resentment, and isolation inevitably blighted the golden promise of Martin's marriage to the girl he loved.

There is yet another cycle of stories in this volume, a collection of seven short autobiographical pieces dealing with Brennan's early childhood. These are far sunnier than the Derdon or Bagot material, charming, beautifully told chapters from the life of a happy and united family. The best are "The Old Man of the Sea," dealing with the mother's irrational and slightly absurd guilt over an indigent apple seller in the neighborhood, and "The Barrel of Rumours," in which the child Maeve is obsessively curious about the private lives of a mysterious community of Poor Clare nuns in the neighborhood.

All the stories in *The Springs of Affection* were written between 1952 and 1973. The 1970s marked the beginning of Brennan's sad decline into schizophrenia. As her psychotic episodes became increasingly frequent, she more or less moved into the ladies' room and reception area at *The New Yorker*, an unkempt old lady who talked to herself and sometimes vandalized the offices of her one-time colleagues. The *New Yorker* staff let her camp out there until her behavior became so violent that she had to be permanently hospitalized. She died in a nursing home late in 1993.

Maeve Brennan was fond of a quotation by her compatriot W. B. Yeats: "Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not persuade, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible." She followed this implicit advice instinctively and with tremendous style. Brennan is a marvelous and idiosyncratic writer whose work should be far better known than it is.

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Notebook

Activism & architecture: a tale of two cities

by Michael J. Lewis

In the popular mythology of the Sixties, few episodes loom as large as the SDS-led student takeover of Columbia University. On April 23, 1968, protesters seized five buildings and under the scrutiny of the world brought a distinguished university in America's largest city to a standstill. For a week, a picturesque gallery of characters, including Tom Hayden, Mark Rudd, and Stokely Carmichael, erected barricades, ransacked offices, issued communiqués, and held interminable meetings. The occupation culminated, as was surely intended, in a rather brutal police action, but by then it had already become one of the mythic events of that turbulent decade. Now, on its thirtieth anniversary, a curious symposium was held at Columbia to take stock of the event—or, more precisely, of one part of the event: the relationship of the Columbia takeover to architecture.

At first glance, architecture seems like a logical lens for looking at 1968. After all, the Columbia unrest was to some extent architectural in origin; that spring longstanding student anger at urban renewal and the destruction of nearby black neighborhoods boiled over when the university began building a new gymnasium in Morningside Heights. Furthermore, during the course of the takeover, the only professional school to be occupied was Columbia's architecture program, housed in Avery Hall, in which the anniversary symposium was held. This architectural aspect of the protest had an international counterpart in Paris, where there immediately followed the May protests which, among other things, resulted in the abolition of the great Ecole des Beaux Arts, the school of architecture that had been the arbiter of French national taste since the early nineteenth century. In 1968, architecture, so it seemed, was both an irritant and a rallying point.

Such was the theme of "Reassessing '68 in New York and Paris: Activism, Architecture, and the Academy," a day-long conference sponsored by Columbia's Buell Center on May 2. Among the international panel of speakers were scholars and architects who not only have studied the events of 1968 but also took part in them directly. As things turned out, there was a great deal about activism, rather less about architecture, but, as we shall see, precious little reassessing.

The morning session was devoted to the history of politics in the Paris and New York schools of architecture. William Littmann, a graduate student, argued that Columbia's program had stultified by the 1960s, suffering from an excessive stress on "entrepreneurial capitalism" and the business aspects of the profession, to the exclusion of any social concerns. As a consequence, many of the better students were drifting to Yale where Paul Rudolph's Brutalist architecture seemed to offer some sort of human focus. In particular, Columbia students were hostile to the whole process of social housing and urban renewal, which

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they branded as "negro removal." For Littmann, the 1968 uprising was not an aberration; rather, it drew on a tradition of student radicalism that stretched back at least to 1932, when architecture students occupied Avery Hall for a day to argue for student rights, only to be beaten up by a mob of "conservative athletes," a group which was invoked repeatedly throughout the day.

If the symposium proved anything, it was to show yet again just how fundamentally different things French are from things American. The Ecole des Beaux Arts was founded after the French Revolution as a successor to the ancient Royal Academy and existed to groom architects for the civil service, focusing on the design and execution of monumental public buildings. A peculiarity of the school was that the bulk of the education took place in affiliated private architectural ateliers, which permitted a certain amount of ideological latitude and flexibility. This system of separate ateliers acted as a kind of intellectual shock absorber that could assimilate new architectural doctrines. It could also lead easily to fragmentation, as was the case during the Sixties, when a sudden expansion in the number of applicants led to a greater number and diversity of ateliers.

At the Ecole, unlike Columbia, there was an explicitly political opposition, whose social thought was Marxist or Communist and whose architectural thought came from the Situationists. This was a Utopian faction which sought a radically autonomous architecture, separate from society and other branches of knowledge, which would serve to create "momentary ambiances of life." Much of their doctrine had strongly Surrealist overtones, and, like the Surrealists, the Situationists found in their "radical subjectivity" an irresistible invitation to self-indulgence and narcissism that would rule out any coherent political action. Nonetheless there were certainly dreams of such action. Bernard Huet, a veteran of the old Ecole and subsequently a professor in its successor, hinted at the kinds of radical ideas that were churning in Paris architectural circles in the mid-1960s. Especially important was a 1963 conference in Havana, where Che Guevara lectured the participants on architecture and social change. Just as he was able to take American guns as a tool of liberation, Che insisted, architects must "take the bourgeois instruments and turn them against society."

Among those who longed to do this, apparently, was Bernard Tschumi, the French deconstructionist who now directs Columbia's architecture program. The English historian Simon Sadler informed the audience—consisting mostly of Columbia architecture students—that their dean once flirted briefly with "paramilitary action" in the late 1960s, hoping to recreate the Paris Commune (Tschumi's perversely self-serving confession of this to Sadler calls to mind the post-1945 recruits to the French Resistance).

How different was the American situation, where there was no well-developed link between architectural and political radicalism, and where architecture students were among the least political of the protesters? In fact, Avery was the sole building not to be seized by direct student action, becoming occupied by default when architecture students, in the midst of an assignment, refused to leave their drawing tables. And even during the takeover, Avery seems to have been the most purposeful of the five buildings, as students proclaimed a "New School of Architecture," drafting spontaneous designs to find a more acceptable solution to the problem of the Morningside Heights gym. During the course of the symposium, the occupiers of Avery emerged as rather reluctant revolutionaries, not even interesting as vandals. Thus Littmann attached great importance to the lack of damage inflicted on Avery Hall, proving that architecture students were "territorial," which is why they made such "exemplary custodians" of the school's cultural heritage.

Unlike the historians, whose claims for the radicalism of architecture were modest

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indeed, the political scientists and philosophers on the panel were less circumspect. These were the heavy-hitters of the symposium, who were reserved for the afternoon session: Douglas Kellner, James Miller, Marshall Berman, and others. For them the occupation of Avery and its adjoining buildings was architectural in the most profound sense of all, amounting to nothing less than "a revolutionary utopia, . . . a space of world revolution." This was the heady claim of Douglas Kellner, the scholar who delivered the keynote address.

At the time of the Columbia takeover, Kellner was a twenty-five-year-old graduate student in philosophy. For him the real heroes of the uprising, and the spiritual authors of 1968, were Henri Lefebvre and Herbert Marcuse—the latter of whom is Kellner's speciality. In particular, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* was the road map for the uprising, with its two-part program of a sharp rupture with existing society, pushed by "an eruption of libidinal energy," which would be followed by a radical transformation of society and the individual.

In Kellner's view, and Marcuse's, sex was the great catalytic agent of the uprising, saturating the entire Columbia campus with "eros and play and liberation." Such a model, of course, makes it very easy to deal with dissenters, among which a substantial portion of the Columbia student body, uneasy about the takeovers, must be counted. But Kellner is able to brand them as "repressed," absolving himself from any responsibility to take their objections seriously. Here he repeated one of the leitmotifs of the conference, that the opposition to the occupations was nothing more than a brutish mob of conservative athletes. He informed his listeners that "right-wing types were very sexually repressed," and conjured up an image of frustrated athletes outside the occupied buildings as they imagined orgies within; he then proceeded to imitate these athletes to the amusement of the student audience.

Kellner's digression was valuable as a living fossil of one of 1968's less attractive traits: the utter contempt with which ideological rivals were regarded. It was certainly far from the spirit of the idealistic Port Huron Statement, about which so much was said at the conference. Perhaps this was a Marxist habit of mind—seeing not principled opponents but only class enemies—which was inherent in the agitprop tactics of the Popular Front which the student protest movement had adopted as their model.

None of the other participants invoked Marcuse, and James Miller, a professor of political science at the New School for Social Research, even spoke instead about the general posture of suspicion toward Utopian schemes in the 1960s. "Utopianism was for a long time a dirty word among the Left," which preferred a posture of intense realism, based on the anti-colonial struggle of the Third World. Miller pointed out that the ultimate failure of the Columbia action, and of the revolutionary movement in general, was prefigured by its own inherent contradictions, above all, the twin goals of personal liberation and political change, which for a passing moment in 1968 ran in tandem but which soon diverged. Finally Miller contrasted the failed revolutionary hopes of that year with the successful Eastern European revolutions of 1989, although when he spoke about their "mainstream constitutional sobriety in the eighteenth-century sense," it was not entirely clear if he thought this was a good thing.

Of the afternoon speakers, only Marshall Berman, who teaches urbanism and political theory at CUNY, explicitly discussed the relationship between Columbia's architecture and the course of the takeover. For Berman, McKim, Mead, and White's great Beaux-Arts plaza before Low Library was precisely designed to hold ten thousand people, as it did during the student protests, making it one of the few public spaces in America that could fulfill Aristotle's demand for a city in which the entire population might meet in democratic interaction. Thus even as the Ecole was being abolished in France be-

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cause of its historical irrelevance, one of the great Beaux-Arts spaces in this country realized its potential, a vital link with the classical wellsprings of democracy.

Berman's notion of the 1968 takeover as utopia was much more modest than Kellner's "libidinal transformation"; instead it was simply a place in which "strangers talked to strangers." He also lamented that the idea of urban spectacle and romance has become anathema to the Left. Observing the Left's chronic inability to appreciate Baron Haussmann, the creator of modern Paris, he proposed that it has never reconciled its anti-urbanist sentiment with the urban energies from which it draws its identity. By looking with a fresh eye at public space and human interaction, Berman avoided the ideological tendentiousness that afflicted much of the other presentations.

It should be clear that "Reassessing '68" did not so much reassess the events of that year as repeat the familiar old assessment, that this was one of the decade's golden moments, like Woodstock, where for one flickering instant the much vaunted direct-participation democracy of the Port Huron Statement was realized. But to reassess an event honestly means to look at it in light of what happened since, and in light of what we now know but did not know at the time. Of this sort of rethinking there was precious little. Surely there were sufficient events over the ensuing years—for example, Prague, the Boat People, Pol Pot, the hedonism of the Seventies, Afghanistan, the collapse of the Soviet Union, even the recent Venona cables, to name a few—that might cast a new light on the events of 1968.

Unfortunately, the general tendency of the symposium was to avoid the mental (and moral) work of a genuine reassessment, and instead to explain away the failure of the Columbia takeover as a victory in disguise. Surely the lowest moment was James Miller's argument that "we won, after all," basing his claim on the current degradation found in popular culture. To prove his point, he asked us to imagine the disgust of "a Christian Evangelical who turns on MTV at 2:00 A.M." And here at last we realize how far away indeed are the events of the Columbia occupation. In 1968 students played at being adults, struggling over the great matters of the twentieth century—racism, imperialism, democracy; in 1998 we have at Columbia adults playing at being children, taking a vicarious pleasure in the mortification of a designated victim—permitted because he is a (presumably repressed) Christian Evangelical.

In the end, the collective tone of "Reassessing '68" was that familiar one of self-congratulation and self-pity that haunts so many exercises in Sixties nostalgia. And for all the talk of libidinal transformation, I suspect most of the young architecture students took away a rather different impression of the Columbia takeover than the speakers intended, more along the lines of an endless, rather anarchic plenary session of the student government. If this indeed is the case, then this symposium—which passed up the opportunity to accomplish its stated purpose—will have done some good after all.

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Letters

Richler's version

To the Editors:
I'm sorry Mordecai Richler didn't enjoy his book tour—or his lunch with me ("Peddler's Diary," January 1998). But, when novelists dip into journalism, I suggest they invest in a notebook and pen. Maybe in Mr. Richler's novels people say things like, "Married to a Jew myself. . . ." I assure you, in real life, I never have said such a thing.

Jan Wong
"Lunch With" Columnist
The Globe and Mail
Toronto, Canada

Mordecai Richler replies:
Ms. Wong is right about one thing. I did not enjoy my lunch with her. Purporting to be a columnist for the *Globe and Mail*, she in fact led me to suspect she was from *The National Enquirer*. But I did quote her correctly.

Rebecca West

To the Editors:
Carl Rollyson states that Rebecca West was the first person of the Left to identify the Soviet Union as an enemy of freedom—and therefore of what was then the Left ("Rebecca West & the FBI," February 1998). But this statement is contradicted even by his own account for he mentions that Emma Goldman took her stand against the Soviet Union before 1920.

This small point is worth making because of a larger error in the background, the belief that the Soviet Union had the support of social democrats everywhere from the outset. Support for Russia did not become the "in" thing until the declaration of a Popular Front in 1935 and even after that the Soviet Union remained an enemy to both the left and right wings of the Labor Party in England.

Even what Mr. Rollyson says about Bertrand Russell and H. G. Wells is likely to mislead. Neither was clearly identified with Left politics, but Russell took anti-Soviet stances at many, many points during his long career (even suggesting dropping atom bombs on Moscow) while Wells was as quick as Rosa Luxemburg and Emma Goldman to denounce Lenin as the foe of freedom (see his book *Russia in the Shadows*, 1920).

Eric Bentley
New York, N.Y.

Carl Rollyson replies:
I find Eric Bentley's letter mystifying. Early on, I state that West had her doubts about the Revolution as early as August 9, 1917. How early does she have to be to win the prize? I was not discussing how support for Russia became the "in" thing but, rather, showing how consistent West had been throughout her career. Russell and Wells, for example, were all over the place—sometimes critical, sometimes supportive of the Soviet Union. They simply are not in West's league. And the Soviet Union may have remained an enemy of both the left and right

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wings of the Labor Party in England, but substantial numbers of that party did not seem to notice. The point is that figures like West and Goldman were left stranded by the Left. I don't see how Bentley's quibbles change my basic point.

Forster's women

To the Editors:
In "The Better James Baldwin" (April 1998), Brooke Allen writes of Baldwin and E. M. Forster that, "both homosexuals, the two writers idealized male characteristics and male friendship and show only a token interest in women, and a cursory understanding of them." Having just reread *Howards End*, I am startled by the wrongness of this statement, at least in regard to Forster.

Howards End portrays four strong, interesting women: Helen and Margaret Schlegel, Ruth Wilcox, and to a lesser extent Miss Avery. Especially with Margaret Schlegel, Forster succeeded in creating a character who is both clever and good (not an easy feat). Far from idealizing male characteristics, the novel often shows the male characters as chauvinistic, shallow, and obtuse. *Howards End*, as well as other novels of E. M. Forster, proves Brooke Allen's generalization quite faulty.

John J. Covolo
Professor of English
Lakeland Community College
Kirtland, Ohio

Brooke Allen replies:
Mr. Covolo is absolutely right about Margaret Schlegel, a glaring exception to the generalization I made. Likewise, I think Baldwin created one powerful female character: Florence in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In general, though, I believe that Forster reserves the things that are important to him—the capacity for intense friendship, for the life of the mind, and for love that combines both the physical and the intellectual, for his male characters. Mr. Covolo will say, What about Lucy in *A Room With a View*? But Lucy could just as easily be a boy as a girl: she is simply a prototypical young person facing the important turning point of her youth.

As for Mr. Covolo's comment about the manifold faults of the male characters in *Howards End*, that is also true: but these characters are seen by Forster as *masculine* (i.e., repressed, fearful of emotion) rather than *male*: the true male, as he sees it, he idealizes. With the exception of Margaret and Mrs. Moore (*A Passage to India*), the realized, full human beings in Forster's work are men: Stewart Ansell and Stephen Wonham in *The Longest Journey*, Mr. Emerson in *A Room With a View*, and, in *A Passage to India*, Fielding and Aziz, whose *potential* (if botched) relationship is more significant than any other in Forster's fiction.

A perusal of Forster's correspondence shows that all of his real friendships were with men. It seems to me that if Forster's career had taken place after rather than before gay liberation he would have written very different stuff, with far fewer female characters.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

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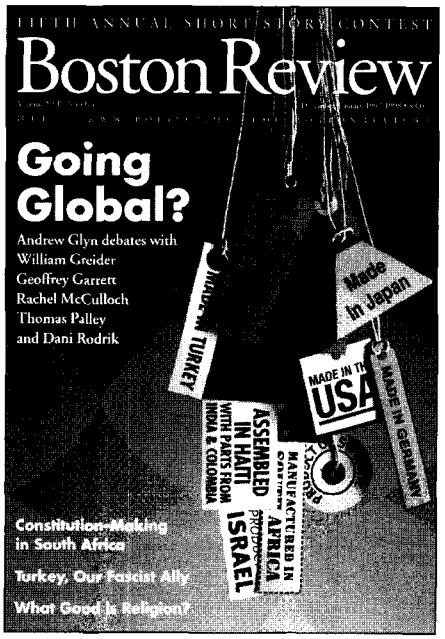

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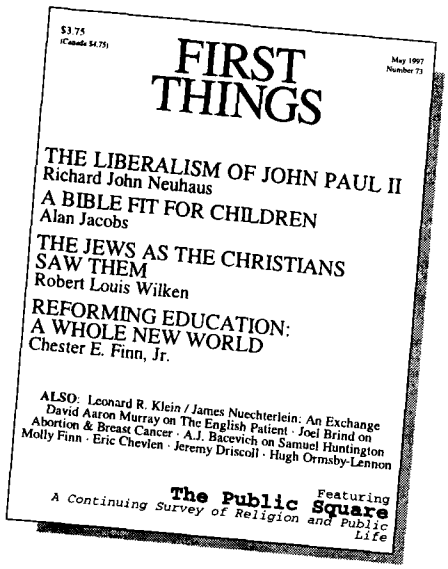
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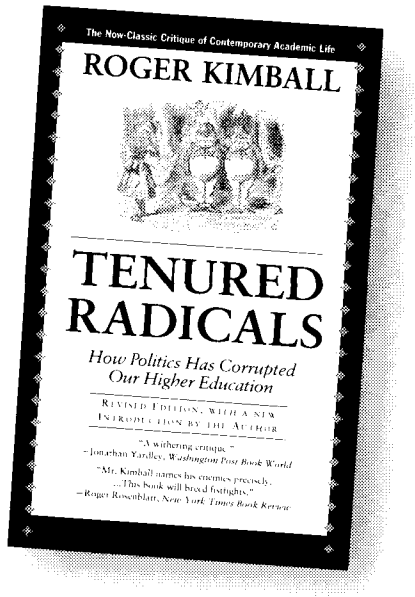
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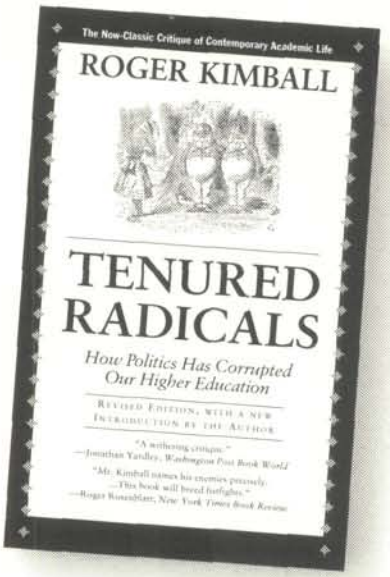
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